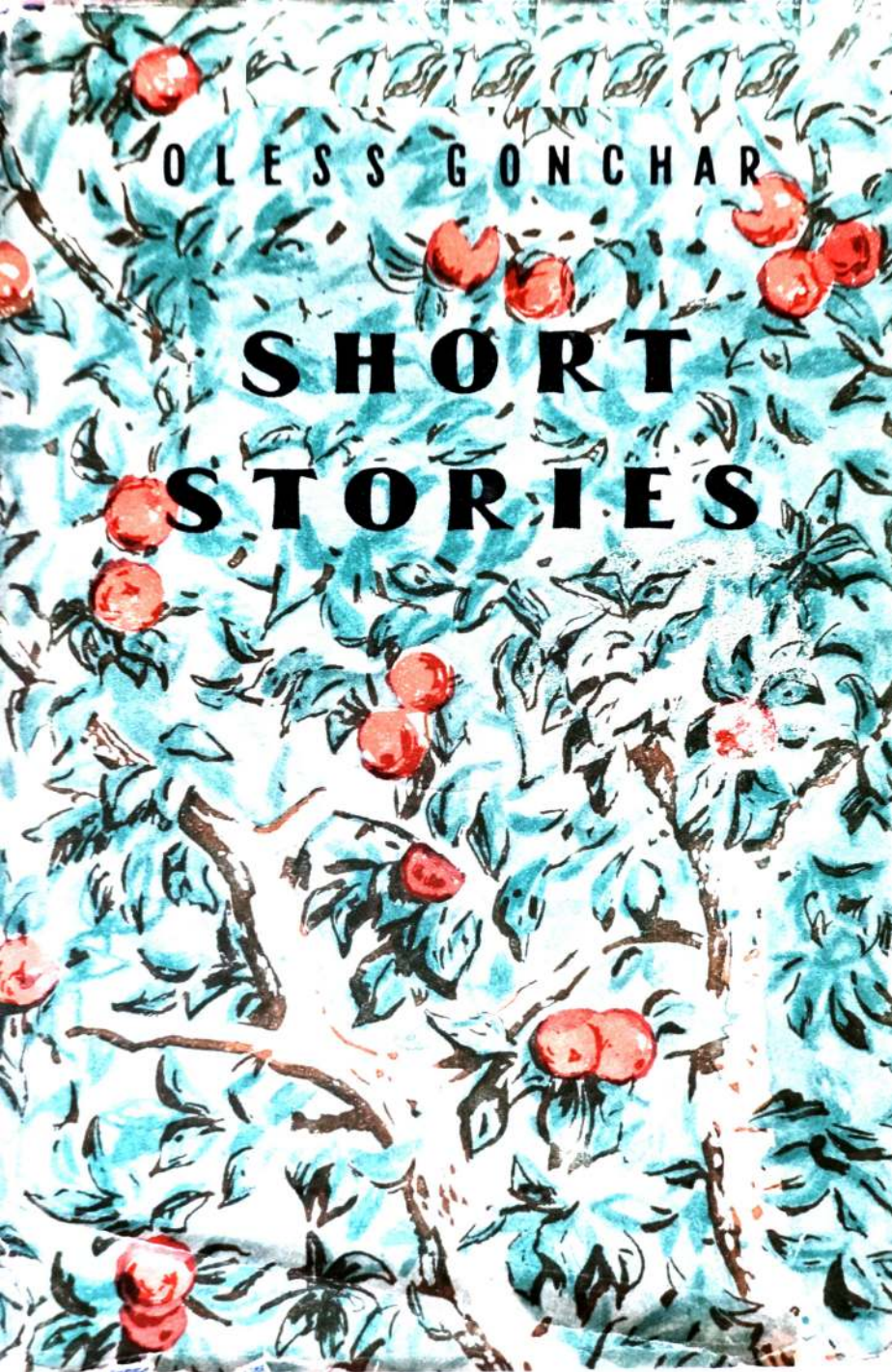
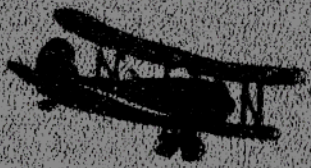

OLESS GONCHAR
SHORT STORIES



OLESS GONCHAR

SHORT STORIES

ОЛЕСЬ ГОНЧАР

РАССКАЗЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

OLESS GONCHAR

SHORT STORIES

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I heard of the outbreak of war at the Korolenko Public Library in Kharkov.

Buried in books and notes, I was preparing that day for an examination in Russian literature.

Still alive in my memory is the pale, startled face of the girl-student who, dashing in, shy to break the scholarly silence reigning in the spacious reading-room, uttered in an undertone the ponderous, stupefying word:

"War. . . ."

A hum of voices spread through the hall, followed by the noise of moving chairs. Stunned by what we had heard, we ran downstairs to the crowded city square.

Molotov was speaking over the radio.

Away to the west our frontier-posts were engulfed by the fire of war; our brothers—men and officers of the Soviet Army—were bearing the brunt of the fascist onslaught.

Leaving a trail of destruction behind it, the war imperilled what was dearest to our hearts—our country. All our plans and aspirations—the youthfully bright plans and aspirations of students—were shattered.

Walking home from the square to the students' hostel, I stopped unconsciously before a familiar show-window with the latest issue of our regional Komsomol newspaper. Its columns still spoke of the peaceful life of Soviet people. My attention was drawn to an article at the bottom of the page. It was a review of my *Stokozovo Field*, a novel recently published in a Kiev magazine.

I had been writing for some years. I wrote prolifically—chiefly short stories of collective-farm life which I, the son of farmers, knew comparatively well. But the stories had been somewhat naive and immature. *Stokozovo Field* stood out among them as my first full-length work over which I had laboured assiduously, and a review of which I had been expecting with impatience.

Here it was.... A favourable, well-wishing review. Had it appeared a day earlier, it would have brought me no end of joy. But now I read it almost indifferently, as if it dealt with someone else and did not concern me. The events of that day had overshadowed everything I had lived by the day before, everything that now would be cast aside—possibly forever.

Standing before the show-window, I thought of my home in Poltava Region, of my brothers, relatives, and numerous school-friends who had grown up and become tractor-drivers, combine-operators, teachers, agronomists.... Of them, as a matter of fact, was my first novel. Today their mothers were seeing them off to the enlistment office....

* * *

Next day I went to the District Komsomol Committee where hundreds of students had come to volunteer for active service.

After a fortnight's training in the environs of Kharkov our student battalion was loaded on a train bound across the Dnieper to the vicinity of Belaya Tserkov, scene of heavy fighting.

In the trenches, shoulder to shoulder with men who had come from the border fighting every inch of the way, we realized that we required much more than a mere readiness to give our lives for our homeland, that our high-minded fervour had to combine with a soldier's fighting skill, with redoubtable patience, with the will to bear all hardships. Trenches, and the workaday toil of a soldier had become our school of life, our second university. During sleepless nights in a listening post, or wading through marshes into the enemy's rear, we often thought about our life and about the historic fortunes of our people. There was a time when ferocious Tartar hordes trampled upon our soil, brutally exterminating the

stock Slav population, setting fire to magnificent temples, destroying the lofty culture of Kiev Rus with the frenzied fury of savages. But that had been long ago, that had been an invasion of rude and ignorant nomads for whom pillage was a habitual occupation, who knew nothing of the worth of culture and civilization. But now, in the 20th century, hordes advanced on us from civilized Europe, and our mothers suffered mediaeval tortures at the hands of butchers with university education. The fascists wanted not only our lives, but our souls as well. They did not shrink from the basest means to defame the lofty ideals of communism, to slander Soviet society, to undermine the faith of the people in the potency of the socialist system, and their faith in Man.

Our appreciation of the beauty of the world became deeper-felt in the face of the looming darkness. Our faith in the justice of our cause, in the irresistible power of our ideals shaped under the influence of the mighty revolutionary teaching of Marxism-Leninism was tempered by our fellowship with our brothers-in-arms, by our single-hearted urge to safeguard the existence of our homeland.

In this stern, workaday war—unseen, but clearly felt—Tolstoy and Gorky, Rolland and Barbusse stood at our side. They, these great men of culture, had taught us to respect Man, to believe in him, to appreciate his spiritual force, his mind, his talent, and his remarkable propensity for self-improvement.

We realized that alongside the great founders and champions of human culture stood their rightful successor—the ordinary Soviet citizen in soldier's uniform. Standing firm for his socialist fatherland, he defended the citadel of world civilization.

Finding myself an active participant in the thick of events at this dark hour, I was amazed by the unparalleled mass heroism of Soviet men and women, by the unprecedented upsurge of patriotism in the people risen in arms against the invaders. There, at the front, I passed a practical course of the science about the exalted and most beautiful of all things—about Man. Only then, in those difficult days of war, did I behold the true greatness of the Soviet people in all its glory. And were I to speak of those who had the greatest influence on me and showed me my place in literature, then I

should speak of the ordinary people, of the workers and collective farmers who had been my trench-mates.

I was awed by their deeds of valour, I admired their fortitude, their courage, the herculean power of their patriotism.

I wanted to write about them.

* * *

I had no practical opportunity of writing a tale or novel because I was constantly in the field as sergeant of a Guards unit. But my passions and thoughts sought an outlet, and this I found in poetry. I could compose verses in the saddle, in dug-outs, on the march—they could arise in surroundings where there was no table, no paper, no ink.

I did not intend becoming a poet, and verses, easily memorized, were but a convenient means of recording clots of my front-line impressions. I nursed the thought—should I survive—of writing a novel about the never-fading valour of the Soviet people. I wanted to portray the leaders of the people—the Communists, who had roused, and headed, and inspired the millions of Soviet men and women in their self-denying struggle with the enemy.

I tackled this task only after I was demobilized, when, upon returning from Hungary in the end of 1945, I again joined the university.

The Alps,—the first book of my trilogy *The Standard-Bearers*—appeared in 1946. I completed the two other books—*The Blue Danube* and *Golden Prague*—in 1947 and 1948. They later won the Stalin Prize. Simultaneously, I wrote *Earth Hums*, the tale of Lyala Ubivovk, heroine of the Poltava young-guard underground who was killed by the fascists in May 1942, and a series of short stories dedicated to war-time encounters on Hungarian and Czechoslovak soil.

These stories comprise the first part of this collection.

* * *

In the past few years I have been absorbed in the developments in the South of the Ukraine. The fortunes of this territory—

once the sparsely populated, arid steppeland known as the Taurida—have become one of the leading themes of my further work.

The crying injustice of social inequality under tsarism was especially evident in the Ukrainian South. The miserable hovels of landless peasants, cruelly oppressed by the landlords and driven to utter ruin by natural calamities—dry wind, poor harvests, dust-storms—nestled alongside the enormous estates of steppe gentry, whose possessions stretched over hundreds of thousands of hectares.

Kakhovka, scene of heroic battles for Soviet power in the years of the civil war, was notorious in tsarist times for its "man fairs," a variety of slave market supplying hands to the estates of southern landlords, the infamous plantators of the 20th century. Up to 100,000 farm-hands in search of work came every spring to Kakhovka from the North of Russia.

The Ukrainian South, like the rest of the country, changed from the bottom up with the consolidation of the socialist system. The class of exploiters was liquidated, and the collective farmer became master of the land. The state equipped collective farms with first-class agricultural machinery, and the lights of the Dnieper Hydro-electric Station lit up the southern steppe. Master hands—corn and cotton growers, and gardeners—appeared out of the midst of the peasantry. With the aid of an advanced agricultural science they raise record harvests.

I decided to depict the past and present of the Ukrainian South in an epic narrative, in several novels. The first—*Taurida*—has already been published.

At the same time I wrote short stories about the Ukrainian South. The second part of this book consists of these stories.

OLESS GONCHAR

THE MOUNTAINS SING

SPRING BEYOND THE MORAVA

Yasha Gumenny, senior sergeant in a battery of 45-millimetre guns, returned from the forward positions in the morning and ordered the battery cook to make the round of the dug-outs and tell the men to come to him at once. The cook, a Georgian, nicknamed Katso, who had a submachine gun slung over his grease-stained overall, smartly saluted. Apparently the salute implied that Katso was fully aware of the complexity of the situation and needed no further explanation.

The yard was empty. The drivers had dumped cases of shells right in the middle of it and had gone back for more. The sergeant stood thoughtfully near the stack of cases for a bit, then sat down on one of them and pulled off his boots. The oozy mud which he poured out of them smelled pungently of forest swamps and decomposed vegetation.

Gumenny's battery had forded the river during the night with the Third Rifle Battalion, to which it was attached. Woods and marshlands edged away from the bank of the Morava, and the enemy, unable to hold them—clinging only to a dam seven kilometres distant from the river—had fallen back.

On the fringe of a township which stood near the dam there was a sugar refinery, which bristled with German machine-guns. Wading through the icy water and forcing their way through the dense undergrowth, our infan-

try pursued the enemy all night. In places the water reached their waists, but they plodded on in silence, holding their weapons over their heads. An occasional muffled yell came from the shorter chaps, and the taller men hurried over to pull them out of the holes. At last, towards dawn, they reached the vicinity of the dam and dug in.

The artillerymen hauled their guns after the infantry. The horses which had made the crossing with them floundered helplessly in the mire and after the first few hundred metres had to be abandoned. Our men found the trans-Morava forests gloomy and forbidding. Only light guns had crossed the river on this forsaken stretch where the opposite bank offered almost insuperable difficulties. A bridge was being laid across the stream some ten kilometres to the left, and the heavier guns had gone there with all the regimental transport.

This explains why there was no one in the village apart from Gumenny's unit and the battalion field-kitchen. Gumenny had gone with the battery all the way to the dam in order to make sure of the firing position, and now he had to deliver ammunition there. Deliver it! This was easier said than done! What with all his drivers busy bringing shells from the dump and him sitting alone on the cases in the middle of the yard!

The sergeant wrapped his feet in dry foot-cloths and pulled on his boots. The sun, big and caressing, rose above the Morava forests. The sergeant's uniform was caked in mud, and it steamed in the way steam rises from the soil in spring; battling against an irresistible desire for sleep, the sergeant saw Katso appear at the gate, striding along energetically. At his back, hardly able to keep up with him, was a group of Hungarians wearing black felt hats and carrying empty sacks.

Gumenny rose to meet them, waiting impatiently for the cook to finish his report. Then, turning to the peas-

ants, he asked if any of them understood Russian. A lively looking sun-tanned veteran stepped out of the crowd.

"I was a prisoner of war,"* he announced somewhat gaily, "in camps in the Tambov and Ekaterinoslav gubernias. . . ."

In saying this he glanced at his companions with a look of importance. Obviously he took pride in having been a prisoner of war in Russia.

"Almost a fellow-countryman!" the sergeant smiled.

"Yes, mister officer!"

He apparently took the sergeant for an officer because a shock of hair peeped from under his cap, while privates, as he knew, had cropped hair.

The guns roared on the other side of the river in the vicinity of the dam. There was a cheerful ring about the firing, and it wasn't at all frightening. But it made the sergeant twitch. A second salvo followed, and then, silence. Gumenny knew that now they had only thirty-eight shells left. Far too few!

Through the veteran the sergeant asked the Hungarians if they would help carry shells to his gunners.

They were silent for a bit. In their narrow, tube-like trousers and polished boots they resembled a gaggle of spindle-legged cranes. They shifted from foot to foot, coughing solemnly. The sergeant gazed at them with the superior air of a military man invested with extraordinary powers.

The distant battery roared again. Gumenny listened for a second, his hand to his ear. The Hungarians listened too.

"Fascist!" said the veteran of Ekaterinoslav, breaking the silence and shaking his fist across the river, "fascist vulture, he plunders everything!"

* The reference is to World War I.—*Tr.*

A chorus of affirmation came from the others. But there wasn't a single "yes" or "no" to the sergeant's request—they couldn't make up their minds, and kept looking at each other. Their hesitation infuriated Gumenny, and he controlled himself with difficulty:

"So you don't want to help my gunners?" he asked.

A dignified Hungarian of about thirty, with a white neck and a magnificent black beard, stepped forward. Katso told the sergeant in a whisper that this was the local schoolteacher, known as the "professor" because of the books which lined the walls of his house. The Hungarians looked at the teacher with obvious respect, waiting for him to have his say. The teacher looked grimly across the river, and then turned to his fellow-villagers with a speech that was as brief as a toast. Gumenny understood only two words: democracy, civilization.

"That's all one hears from them," the sergeant thought angrily, "I'd like fewer words, and more action!"

At this moment the teacher faced him, and held out his open sack with a grand gesture.

"Fill it up! We don't want the fascists back!"

Gumenny broke open a case and began to transfer shells to the teacher's sack. The veteran of Ekaterinoslav was second. He winked to the sergeant and held out his sack.

"Hop along, my hearties!" he chanted the words of a Russian song that he had learned long ago. "Hop-hop-hop!"

Having filled all the sacks, Gumenny stuffed shells into his own knapsack, and said:

"Forward, march!"

They crossed the river in a tiny boat, three at a time. Gumenny went with the first lot, and took the oars. The feel of the oars delighted him; it was the first row of the spring. The river billowed in the sun, full-chested and fresh, breathing strength and power. The blue waters

sought to take the tiny craft downstream, past the placid quiet of the banks, into the tender vitality of spring, all the way to the Danube itself. But Gumenny pulled against the current, noiselessly dipping the oars into the blue of the sky reflected in the water.

Upon reaching the other bank he waited. The Hungarian who returned with the boat was probably an excellent fisherman. He handled the oars to perfection, and the sergeant felt respect for his skill, as he always did when people worked well.

The Morava lapped softly against the bank. The trees drowsed in the sun. Tired after the eventful night, Gumenny sat on a damp, decaying tree-trunk and watched Katso on the other bank directing the operation. The opposite bank, high and laid out with stone, was crowned with the village—splendid-looking, peaceful and unscathed by war. The whitewashed houses looked gay in the spring sunshine. The sergeant thought of the dugouts in which people lived among the devastation in his native land. The homeless inhabitants of whole villages had nowhere to live but in the earth.

"The day will come when we shall have houses like these," he thought, "the war can't last forever. When it's over we shall come home and take up saw, plane, and axe. There'll be great things doing!"

The teacher in the approaching boat held a pipe between his teeth. His beard wasn't quite as magnificent as it had seemed before, and appeared to have shrunk.

"He loves civilization," Gumenny thought, "so let him put his shoulder to the wheel this once. A sack of shells can hardly be too heavy for a lofty ideal!"

When all of them had made the crossing, Gumenny counted the carriers and they entered the forest along a narrow cutting. Most likely some of them had come this way with their oxen for hay before, but now the forest was flooded with spring water. It still had the tang

of snow. The trees were bare, but one felt that they were about to turn green. All was quiet, and the sunlight lay peacefully on the submerged glades.

The firing-line was silent.

The sergeant went ahead, knee-deep in the rippling water—the Hungarians following him like a gaggle of cranes. Bent under their loads, they occasionally muttered to each other. The teacher was covered in mud to the ears. He breathed heavily, stumbling against the submerged trunks.

"Hurry!" the sergeant shouted every time one of them lagged.

He walked on, as agile as a deer, gay and happy because he felt stronger and sturdier than the "professor" and his fellow-villagers. Moreover, the battery was silent and that meant things were all right. Spring roamed through the forest and over the pools; it was invisible, but it could be sensed with every fibre of one's being.

When they came to a dry place, Gumenny let the carriers rest for a bit. They dropped to the soggy earth which seemed to sway and tremble under them as though it were set on yeast. The sergeant passed around his tobacco-pouch, and they smoked avidly, each occupied with his own thoughts. The "professor" had lost his taste for speech-making. He sat on a stump, trying to regain his breath, and his plump stomach, concealed until now by his jacket, heaved laboriously. His face was sour.

Only the veteran who had lived in Ekaterinoslav when Gumenny was still unborn, was not disheartened. He told the sergeant with much humour about the pretty girls he had met in his country, and that to this day one of them—Marusya-Maricska—lived in his heart.

"She's a grandmother now," Gumenny remarked.

But the Hungarian wouldn't hear of it: his Marusya-Maricska would never grow old!

The nearer they came to the forward position, the gloomier the carriers became, and the brighter the sergeant. At a sudden burst of machine-gun fire the carriers looked like beasts at bay. This irrational and premature alarm tickled Gumenny, and he shouted in a stentorian voice:

"Hurry up!"

Then a German gun boomed, the invisible missile screeched through the spring air high over the forest and exploded somewhere far away among the trees.

The carriers stopped. They exchanged frightened glances and then focussed their eyes questioningly on the sergeant, as though this tall, slender youth with features that bespoke frankness and sincerity, was their only hope.

"It came nowhere near us!" Gumenny laughed. "Forward, march!"

"Hurry up, hurry up!" a bewhiskered spindle-legged humourist mocked morosely.

Furious fire suddenly broke out in the vicinity of the dam. Rifles cracked, sub-machine guns barked and mortar shells whizzed. Gumenny stiffened, became serious and tense. His battery replied thinly. He counted the salvoes, distinguishing them easily from the sound of German guns. He could tell the voice of his battery from thousands of similar voices.

The air over their heads vibrated. Shells exploded near by, the water rose in fountains and the forest groaned.

"Take cover!" shouted Gumenny.

But no one heard him. Their faces distorted with fear, the Hungarians had fled. They ran in silence, overtaking each other, stumbling, falling, turning one way and another at every explosion. Gumenny raced them.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted, but none obeyed him. "Take cover," but none lay down.

The sergeant noticed that the Germans were shifting their fire towards the river and that the fleeing Hungarians would run right into it. But how to warn them? How could he tell them they were running blindly to their doom, that their only hope lay in going forward, or in taking cover? Catching up with the "professor" who was breathless and running behind the rest, Gumenny grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and bowled him over.

"Lie down!"

He caught two more carriers and made them drop. Shells were exploding right in their path now, so the others also turned. With threats and imprecations Gumenny made them take cover and told them not to move until he gave the order to do so. The Hungarians raised their heads above the water. Helplessness and doom were written on their faces. They probably cursed the minute they had volunteered to go up the line with shells for the Soviet gunners. The sergeant noted with satisfaction that not one of them had dropped the ammunition. They had forgotten about it in their panic, and their hands had closed convulsively on the sacks.

Gumenny lay in the water and listened intently. The gases of the explosions hadn't cleared yet when he got up and moved forward. The carriers followed him obediently, conscious that they had this youth to thank for their lives. They saw a fierce fire raging in the place they had headed for in their stampede. If the sergeant hadn't stopped them, hadn't thrown them to the ground, most of them wouldn't be alive. They looked at the Russian youth with a mingling of trust and wonder. Whenever Gumenny walked faster they followed suit, as though afraid they would lose him and perish. They watched his hand, in the same way that an orchestra watches its conductor. They rose, dropped, rose again at his command.

"He's more civilized than we are," said the "professor" to his neighbour suddenly, wiping the sweat from his brow. "He sees everything clearly, and understands this pandemonium better than we do. We would have been blown to bits, if it hadn't been for him."

Another artillery barrage forced them to the ground again. Gumenny counted the muffled shots of the enemy guns and knew how many explosions would follow. But somehow he missed one in the drum-fire. No sooner had he risen and opened his mouth to order an advance than a sudden fountain of earth and fire shut off the world from him. It seemed as if a piece of rock had hit him squarely in the chest, and he fell.

When the smoke cleared he saw a blue expanse of sky and a split tree-top hanging above him. It was still smoking.

"I suppose I was hit by a branch," he thought, making an effort to get up. As he did so he felt something warm spreading over his chest. He looked at his quilted jacket and saw wisps of cotton wool sticking out of a round hole. He touched it. It wasn't big. "Just a tiny splinter." The shrapnel hadn't gone out through his back, for there was no blood under the knapsack.

Above the din of rifle fire and the staccato of machine-guns the sergeant recognized the salvo of his own battery. "Let them have it!" He got on to his feet. How many shells would they have now? He had lost count.

Every breath he took caused him excruciating pain. He looked back at the carriers: were they aware that he had been hit? But the faces of the Hungarians were as grim and frightened as before, and the sergeant noted with satisfaction that they had not noticed it.

"Forward, march!" he said, and took the lead.

Unthinkingly, he put his hand under the jacket, felt for the hot, pulsating wound, and pressed his fingers over it to stop the bleeding.

Dressing the wound would take time, and, moreover, he didn't want the Hungarians to know that he was hit.

"Good thing I wasn't laid out," he thought. "They would have thrown down the shells, and made for home. More so, since nobody besides me knows the way to the firing position."

The roar of guns continued. The sergeant had visions of the battery commander kneeling on the embankment, and, in the certainty that the shells would come any minute, shouting his curt command, "Fire! Fire!" The gunners were no less convinced that Gumenny would not let them down. It flashed across his mind: "What if that shell had laid me low?"

Gumenny turned round. He had the impression that the carriers had quickened their step, but in reality it was he who had slowed down. The knapsack seemed heavier than it had been, and the sergeant thought that this was the effect of it being drenched in water. "The shells must be wet too," he thought, but then the absurdity of it dawned on him: shells don't absorb moisture.

A violent thirst tortured him, and he scooped up the grey, misty water with his cap, gulping it down breathlessly. The wet cap on his head felt refreshing, but the world about him kept turning a misty grey.

Even the azure sky was becoming smoky.

He turned round again.

The schoolteacher was at his back, plodding through the quivering mist. Why had he quickened his step? And why that strange expression on his face as he unblinkingly looked at Gumenny with his big, glassy eyes. He would now tell the sergeant to step lively—and then laugh in his face.

Gumenny counted the carriers once more. They were all here, down to the last one, and all of them watchfully staring at him. They did not seem to be out of

breath any longer, and evidenced no fright when a heavy mine-shell crashed among the splintering trees. Could they have discovered that he had been hit?—Surely, they were now waiting until his strength failed him, and would then throw down the shells and return to the other bank, the enemy would slaughter the gunners alongside their silenced guns and, sweeping through the forest, drive the battalion back to the Morava.

"Shan't stop till my dying breath," the sergeant thought, feeling for his pistol. "Hope the blood doesn't give out, and I don't lose consciousness...." He turned round again, breathing heavily. They were all there: the spindle-shanked chap with the narrow trousers, and the veteran of Ekaterinoslav.... And the schoolteacher was right on his heels. He wasn't moaning any longer, and the march seemed to have lent him strength.

There was hardly any pain, but breathing had become troublesome and the sergeant gasped for air with wide-open mouth. The thirst continued to torture him. He was knee-deep in water, but couldn't trust himself to stoop for it for fear of falling. He had the impression that his insides were aflame, but, plodding on, fought off the desire to dip himself in the cool water. He turned his eyes away from it, only to hear it plashing under his feet.

Blood, hot and sticky, was running down his body through the fingers which he kept pressed to the wound. The farther he went the harder it was to lift his feet. Maybe the boots were heavy because they were full of blood. Snags and stumps lay in his path, although at dawn he had walked back from the forward position without noticing any. How cheerful and gay the forest had been then, rising out of the spring waters!

It was peaceful and sunny and there was a placidness in the atmosphere, while the trees, now dimly seen, bending over, quivered and seemed to touch the water with their topmost branches. Or maybe it was just their re-

flections that quivered in the ripples of the water. The sergeant felt like stopping—if only he could immerse himself to the neck and drink and sleep, sleep and drink! The world round him was in a deepening mist, as if weighed down by a torpid heat.

The battery was close at hand, somewhere beyond the trees. Gumenny had counted more shots than there were shells. How on earth could that be? Had he counted enemy shell explosions by mistake?

He scooped up water with his hand. As he was drinking the "professor" addressed his companions. From the corner of his eye Gumenny watched the Hungarian's shiny, close-shaven neck. Democracy, civilization.... What was he jabbering about? Was he instigating them to desert?

"Come on!" the sergeant muttered hoarsely to the carriers. His face was white as chalk. "Let's get moving!"

Wet strands of hair fell over his eyes in disorder, and with an effort he raised his arm to push them away.

The battery boomed, urging him forward: "Hurry, sergeant, hurry! I need your help!"

On they trudged.

Back of Gumenny the teacher was again exhorting his companions who were muttering and shaking their whiskers. Turning round, the sergeant saw the teacher's black beard looming nearer and nearer. The veteran of Ekaterinoslav and the lanky humourist in the narrow trousers were at his side. What were they up to?

The veteran waved his clay pipe and began a speech. The "professor," he said, had explained everything. They knew why the comrade sergeant was clutching his breast: had he not left a trail of blood in the water? The teacher had said it would be a disgrace if the young Russian had to go on with a piece of shrapnel in his chest and they did nothing to help him. The teacher had told them that they ought to put their shoulders to the

wheel in the fight for democracy and civilization, and not look on calmly while the young man's blood was flowing for these things. If they did this they would know the worth of civilization, and how to defend it!

So they'd relieve comrade sergeant of his load of shells. They'd find room for them in their own sacks. Just let him show them the way to the forward positions.

They unhooked the knapsack on Gumenny's back and distributed the shells.

The sergeant looked at the carriers and made a terrific effort to keep on his feet. It surprised him that the faces he now saw through the haze were no longer sullen and angry, but good-natured and kind.

Two of them helped Gumenny, one on either side. They trudged on again. Gumenny was oblivious to everything save the watery path—nothing mattered but the path. Breathing with difficulty in the warm, stuffy mist, he still saw the path winding in and out of the trees.

"This way," he mumbled, "this way. . . ."

He had the feeling that the trees were pressing in on him from both sides.

Soon they saw the dam, fringing the forest like a huge horseshoe. The black outlines of trenches ran along it, greatcoats were drying in the sun, and the soldiers were calling to each other. Visible from the chest upwards in their trenches, it seemed as if they were growing out of the earth. At the foot of the dam stood the battalion's mortars and the 45-millimetre guns. A soldier saw the Hungarians emerge from the trees supporting Gumenny, and heading towards the battery.

"Look," he shouted, "the sergeant's come back with civvies."

The teacher replied proudly:

"We are not civilians!"

Grasping the situation at a glance, the battery commander shouted to his orderly: "Fetch the doctor, quick!"

Then he turned politely to the Hungarians:

"Good morning!"

They replied in chorus:

"Thank you!"

They knew a few words of Russian, and mistook the expression of gratitude for that of greeting.

"What are they thanking us for?" the battery commander asked in surprise, and glancing at the battery crews, he repeated: "Why?"

His comrades took charge of the exhausted sergeant. They placed him gently on the grass, stripped him and he withdrew his clenched hand from the wound.

The fist was smeared with blood.

The battery commander gazed intently at the blood-smeared fist—so this was the answer to his question.

MODRY STONE

I

I see you as you come out of your mountain cabin and look down.

"Tereza!" mother calls, but you make no reply.

"Tereza!"

But you are smiling to someone.

The breezes roam through the Rudny Mountains. The sounds of spring are in the air, the green oaks rustle on the hillsides, and the stones, washed clean by the rains, sparkle in the sun.

"Tereza! What on earth are you gazing at?"

You're flapping your arms like white wings almost as if you wanted to fly:

"Mother mine, the Lord knows who it is I'm seeking."

The high dome of the skies above you, resembling a blue bell, gives back the gentle rustling of the breeze.

II

What are you looking at? What are you listening to?...

It was frosty and deserted when I knocked at your window. I could hear people moving in the house, but no one answered my knock: they were holding council. The blinding snow was driving in from under the shed. The snow-laden wind moaned in the hollows of the hills.

I knocked again. Lightly, as if it could have been heard away down there in the valley. Then, at last, a voice asked, "Who's there?"

What was I to say? Who were we?

"Friends," I said with difficulty. For three days and nights we had snow instead of water, and I was hoarse. Then a voice rang out in the cabin as clear as sunlight.

"Mummy, they're Russians!"

The door opened slowly. I entered the cabin with my finger on the trigger of the sub-machine gun, and flashed my torchlight. In its beam I saw your mother, frightened and rooted by the table, and you, still as a statue, your unplaited hair cascading over your breast, stood by the tall bed.

I switched off the torch and asked you to blackout the windows.

Mother was lighting the lamp, and the match trembled in her hand. You, barefooted, stood on a chair and drew the curtains.

Jumping down from the chair, you faced me. Only then did I see the holes in my white camouflage cape. You, too, were in white and you had a black band on your sleeve.

"So that's what the Russians look like," you said.

"And what did you think they looked like?"

"Like that."

Then you offered me your hand. My hands were red, frozen, and wrapped in soiled bandages. The bandages were a protection against the cold—we lost our mittens in the ordeal among the cursed rocks.

"Do you have any callers here?" I asked.

"We had none today," your mother replied.

She stood by the tiled fire-place and looked at me with sad eyes.

"Why are you in mourning?"

"For our František," mother said, and you added, "for the Czechoslovak Republic."

I went out into the yard, passed the sheepfold and whistled softly. White and ghostlike Ilya came from the

shelter of a haystack. He was frozen stiff and cursed loudly.

"How are things?" he asked.

"All right."

"Shall I take the radio?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Then we came in. Ilya smiled broadly when he saw the brightly-burning fire. He left the radio at the door, shook the snow off his clothes and listened in amazement to Slav speech.

"Why, it's just like being at home!" he exclaimed, "I understand every word!"

"We understand Russian too. We are Slovaks."

"It's just like home!" Ilya repeated.

Mother pointed to the case by the door, "What have you got there?"

You guessed at once:

"A radio!"

"A radio!" mother cried out, clasping her hands. "I beg you: not here, not in the house! You can stay, but no radio. Radio brought us too much evil. It cost us our František."

František, her son, had been a regular listener to London and Moscow. But he had been careless and had told others about it. So the quislings came, smashed the radio set and arrested František. Last Thursday they shot him in the quarries. The Schtandartenführer said that he was a partisan. Just show them a Slovak and they'll say he's a partisan. No one could have taken her husband for a partisan! He's a forester, nothing more! And yet they seized him and drove him off to dig trenches for the Germans. "I beg you: we don't want any more trouble!"

"Mother," said Ilya, trying to console her, "it's a silent radio, it's out of order."

"I don't care, we don't want it here!"

So Ilya took the wireless outside.

The heat from the fire was comforting, it warmed one up like alcohol. I shivered and felt the mountain cold thawing in my insides. For three days and three nights we hadn't made a fire for fear of being spotted. We had crawled among the rocks above the highway and at times clambered to the ridge from where we could see the enemy batteries.

From time to time we contacted "Symphony" and radioed all the necessary information.

We had to be on the move all the time. This exhausted us. Moving from gorge to gorge we often lost our footing, especially at night, and tumbled down the rocky hillside. Had there been less snow we'd have broken our necks for certain. Fortunately, we only bruised our hands and knees, tore our capes into shreds and, worst of all, damaged the radio.

"That's what the falls have done," Ilya said gloomily when the transmitter went out of action. We had completed the assignment, however, and decided to make the way back to our own lines the same night.

You poured warm water into a basin. I tried clumsily to unbandage my hands, but my fingers were numb.

"I'll do it for you," you said.

Your fingers were nimble, warm and tender. It didn't hurt at all when you pulled off the blood-smeared bandages. You threw them into a pail and wrapped my hands in gauze. My hands were burning hot and the gauze was dry and soft.

"Men from Russia," said your mother, "come to the table and have a cup of hot coffee."

You placed steaming cups before us.

"Please, another cup," you said when I finished with the first. "We have waited a long, long time for you ... Comrade!" And you looked intently into my eyes. It was then that you captured my heart.

III

We smoked, drowsed off and drooped wearily.
For sixty hours we hadn't closed an eye.
"Get some sleep," you said, "I'll keep guard."
We rose from the sofa and smiled.
"Where are you going?" you asked, pleadingly.
"We haven't a minute to spare, Teresa."

Your mother, pale and despondent, murmured something. "A prayer," I thought.

"Mother," Ilya said, "we shall return! We'll return with our Katyusha and Ivan Grozny rocket launchers. I'll give you a new radio set and you'll be able to listen to the whole world!"

"God grant it!" she whispered, "Teri, see our guests out."

We went out into the blinding wind, leaving behind the light, the warmth, and the human kindness.

From the valley far below there came to us, as if from the bowels of the earth, the ceaseless thunder of the front.

The dull glow of fires rose beyond Modry Stone. Modry Stone—that's what it says on the map. But the soldiers call it Moodry* Stone, because it took so much effort to drive the enemy out of the little township. Mountain peaks on the right and left of it tower like bastions.

You walked ahead, wrapped in your shawl, jumping lightly from stone to stone. We came to a halt above the highway, which was a white abyss at our feet. Down below we saw German trucks, black against the snow, the drivers stamping their feet and beating their arms. Clouds of snow billowed above the fires.

You showed us the easiest way to the mills, and, taking off your mitten, stretched out your hand to me.

"What is your name?" you asked.

* *Moodry*—Russian for wise.—*Tr.*

Your slender, caressing hand trembled in mine and filled me with warmth. I glanced upwards at the mountains, at the time-worn Modry Stone, and it no longer seemed such a stranger.

"We'll meet again, Tereza. We must meet again!"

You stood there deep in thought, and murmured, "Fate itself brought us together."

"You will wait for me," to which you replied: "As the Lord is my witness!"

IV

I returned.

Modry Stone, the highway and the mountains—all had been liberated. I saw the bare chimney rising out of the ashes in your yard.

And as I drew nearer I saw your mother. She was poking the ashes with a stick, picking out blackened odds and ends. She'd examine them closely, throw them away and then go on with her sifting. It was clear that she was sifting the ashes just for the sake of doing something.

"Good day," she said, and bent over the ashes again. She failed to recognize me.

And when I told her who I was she raised her face and stared at me, and her bloodless, tightly-pressed lips quivered. She swayed and grasped the edge of the tiled fire-place, all that remained of her hearth and home. With tears welling in her eyes she told me the whole story.

"They came the next morning looking for my husband.

" 'He has given us the slip!' the policeman yelled, 'he was here last night!'

" 'He hasn't been here,' Tereza said.

" 'You're lying!' they shouted. 'We've seen his tracks in the snow. You and somebody else accompanied him, we've seen your smaller tracks, too.'

"They ransacked everywhere—in the garret and in the barn; they smashed the crockery and they found your blood-smeared bandages.

" 'Whose blood is this?' they demanded.

" 'Mine,' Tereza said.

" 'Explain?'

" 'I cut my hand,' she replied.

" 'You can't fool us!' they roared. 'The blood is fresh! You've had partisans here.'

"When the officer heard this, he said: 'You'll come with us!'

"And so they took Tereza to Mikulov.

"I could hardly keep up with them, while Tereza walked on in front. Not once did tears come in her eyes, she just kept looking back.

" 'Go home, mother,' she said, 'it will be difficult for you to climb up the hill.'

"When we came to the ridge she looked back more frequently.

" 'What are you staring at?' they shouted.

" 'I want to see my fill of Modry Stone,' she replied.

" 'Maybe you've got a sweetheart there?'

" 'Yes,' she said.

"We reached the top of the ridge where the highway turns to Mikulov. A few steps more and our place would be out of sight. My Tereza stopped, pale as a sheet, and gazed intently in the direction of Modry Stone. But they drove her on:

" 'Keep going!' they shouted.

" 'Just one more look. I want to treasure Modry Stone in my heart.'

" 'You're not looking at it at all,' one of them observed, 'your eyes are on something else. Where is your sweetheart?'

"I, too, noticed that she was looking in another direction.

" 'Hey,' shouted one of the policemen and he rushed towards her, 'she's looking in the direction of Russia!'

"They beat her with their whips. She tried to ward off the blows and kept looking.... By now we could see down below, far away to the horizon, the white puffs of the Russian guns.

"They seized her by the arms and pushed her forward. They jostled her, hustled her on and said threateningly:

" 'Look back once more and you'll see!'

"Silently she wiped the blood from her face, and still she looked back.

" 'Whip her!' they roared and quickened their steps.

"I ran after them, stumbled, fell on a stone and wept there till nightfall...."

V

Memories fade. Even the memory of what they call the unforgettable first love. Why, then, doesn't this fleeting encounter, this single glance, why doesn't it fade from my memory, and why have I the feeling that it will never fade?

Because you are alive. Because the far-away Rudny Mountains follow me everywhere, they draw nearer every day. I can see them, the snow has melted on them, the trees are bursting into leaf, caressed by the warm spring sun, and the meadows, like blue lakes, are gay with the first flowers of spring, which in your country you call the "heavenly fountain."

I close my eyes and see you coming out on to the wooden porch, in your white dress with the black arm-band, looking downwards where our forward positions had been beyond Modry Ṣtone, at the tall grass growing there, and Slovaks riding peacefully on the paved road that now runs across the former no man's land. They ride and

watch the vine tendrils rise from the soil and stretch sparkling to the sun.

We often meet at such times, you and I, and sit on a stone for hours, talking:

Tereza: "Where have you been all these years?"

I: "That's all over now. Nothing shall ever separate us."

Tereza: "Never?"

I: "Never."

Tereza: "How happy I am that we shall always be together! I have waited so long for you, ever since that dark winter night: it seems like a thousand years!"

I: "And it seems to me that it's taken me a thousand years to reach you!"

Tereza: "Give me your hand. Can you feel how the thousand years have shifted? They're ahead of us now, aren't they? We'll live as long as the sun shines, as long as the trees turn green on the mountain-sides. We are rich!"

I: "I shall never hurry again as I did that winter's night. We hardly had time to speak to one another. A searing wind howled among the rocks and we couldn't hear our own voices."

Tereza: "Yes, but we've plenty of time now. And I'll say all the things that I've wanted to say to you. Listen, can you hear the rustling of the grass on the ridge? And the sky above us, high and spring-like, tinkling in the breeze like a blue bell? Just listen!..."

ON BALATON

Margit sat on the bank of the lake rocking the baby in her arms. It was a lonely, desolate place, like the very edge of the world. The waves sighed wearily and white gulls darted in alarm over the water.

Whenever would he sell his grapes?

More than an hour had gone by since old man Sándor tied his boat and left for the station with two baskets of grapes. He had asked Margit to keep an eye on the oars. Oh, this Sándor! He had heard somewhere that a train-load of demobilized soldiers was leaving Siófok for the Soviet Union today, and he just had to be on the scene. Out of breath and perspiring he had rushed over in his tiny boat from the other bank to do a little trade with the soldiers and earn an extra pengö.

Band-music reached Margit from the station. This wasn't the first time that the band had played this autumn. A few days earlier engine-driver Vitez Molnar, Margit's husband, had started out with another train-load of demobilized men. When would he return? Had he any inkling of the sorrow come upon his wife and their little Jeří?

The station lay beyond the trees. Through the gaps in the gold-tinted autumn foliage of the park Margit saw the two-storied grey station-house, decked out in flags. A gesticulating Soviet officer stood on a red-cov-

ered rostrum midway down the platform, addressing the soldiers lined up before their cars. His voice didn't reach Margit, but over there they were listening intently. The uniforms of the men drawn up in ranks showed green in the distance, and civilians milled at their side, to the left of the station-building. These were Hungarians who had come from neighbouring villages to see off their friends and liberators.

Among them was Sándor, the owner of this frail craft which would take Margit across the lake. He had rushed to the station in the hope of doing a brisk trade only to stumble on a sober and disciplined meeting. No doubt he was disappointed, and was now stuck in the crowd with his two baskets.

The sleeping child in Margit's arms was breathing heavily, its little face quivering and aflame with fever.

It was high time they were off! Balaton, Hungary's capricious inland sea, glowered dark and sullen!

The opposite bank, clearly visible by day, began to fade, withdrawing from Margit into the fog. The villages dotting the shore were barely visible among the sloping hillocks.

Soon the white villas on the hill-sides were enveloped in shadows. These villas used to belong to the rich, but now they were the property of the people. Some of them still served as hospitals. Wounded soldiers recuperated there under the care of experienced military doctors. Margit had heard a great deal about these Soviet doctors. She'd ask them to examine her baby. Would they agree to look at the child? After all, this was a purely military hospital.

Only this morning little Jeří was wreathed in smiles, lying peacefully in the shade, while Margit worked in the vineyard. Then she became fretful and began to whimper. Margit gave her the breast; her little lips were like fire....

She wanted to show the baby to the quack, but the neighbours insisted on her going to the Soviet doctors on the other side of Balaton.

She rushed to the lake, but missed the ferry to the northern shore; it had departed a few minutes earlier and would return only the next day.

Margit was about to set off on foot along the path fringing the huge horseshoe formed by the shore, but her native lake, sensing her anguish, sent her this gasbag Sándor. He had promised to take her across in the twinkling of an eye, and she, unfortunately, had believed him. He was a bit tipsy and it would have been better had she gone on foot. She would have covered a good part of the distance by now.

What a long time he is! Maybe he wants to be an orator in his old age?

The band at the station struck up again, playing a rousing flourish. A stocky general was on the rostrum now.

Balaton growled, and the park sighed as the yellow leaves floated downwards.

The child was burning with fever and twitched spasmodically in its sleep. The boat was moored, the stone was cold and immobile, and nobody in the world had a thought for poor Margit, sitting in agony on the lakeside in the damp of the evening. How puny she felt, and how helpless against these grey expanses of water!

Low-lying leaden clouds scurried past and the wind carried the sad, melancholy cries of the gulls.

The band struck up a military march.... The meeting had ended and the soldiers quickly boarded the cars. A long farewell whistle and the train, adorned with greenery and slogans, puffed off on its journey east. It gathered speed swiftly, rushed past the semaphore and disappeared into the misty distance.

"Bon voyage!" Margit thought, "I'd come to see you off had it not been for little Jeří taking ill."

With his hat well back on his head and coat-tails flapping in the wind, Sándor returned, grinning broadly; while still quite a bit away he shook his baskets to show Margit that they were empty.

"I suppose you're thinking that I drove a hard bargain for my grapes, Margit?" Sándor shouted, throwing the baskets into the boat alongside an inflated automobile tube, which, apparently, served as a life-belt in moments of danger.

"Ha-ha! You don't know Sándor yet, my little one! My hands would have withered away had I taken a single pengö on a day like this! Nor will I charge you anything! Take them, I said, take them and eat them on the way, enjoy yourselves and don't forget old Sándor! One good turn deserves another! What else could I do? They're splendid chaps. I took a great liking to them, so I made them a present. A modest one, 'tis true, but right from the bottom of my heart...."

"Let's get going!" said Margit as she hurried the boatman, "the wind is rising and the lake's getting rough!"

"Wind and wave are nothing to me!" Sándor declaimed good-naturedly. "If I didn't drown in Horthy's time, I'm not going to drown now!"

While he was fussing about with the boat another three passengers appeared: Soviet military—two men and a slender girl with the rank of captain.

They stood on the hillock talking quietly, their eyes searching the shore for the ferry-boat. At last they addressed Sándor, and that started him chattering again. Once he got going nothing could stop him! First he explained elaborately that there would be no ferry-boat until next day. Then he insisted that he had seen the girl-captain on the other bank and knew exactly where she wanted to go. And finally he assured them that, if

they so desired, he would take them across "in the twinkling of an eye."

The passengers were plainly delighted. They held a brief council, and, joking about Sándor's fragile craft and the life-belt, they clambered in.

The three of them sat on the board-bench facing Margit. A stocky private on the right, a grey-haired lieutenant with a drawn, thin face on the left, and in the middle sat their companion, the golden-haired girl with the rank of captain. As she took her seat she smiled at Margit, and with the typical, almost envious sympathy of the female, she praised the red-cheeked, sleeping infant.

Sándor took up the oars. The bottom of the boat scraped on the gravel; then they headed for open water. The dwarf olive-trees and the park, tinged with October crimson, retreated into the distance.

Margit sighed deeply. They were not crossing Balaton, their route lay across one of its bays and the distance from bank to bank was about three kilometres, but Margit felt as though she were on a dangerous ocean voyage.

She had crossed here before. As a girl she used to cross with her companions for piece-work jobs at the railway station, and later, after she met Vitez Molnar, became his wife and came to live in Siófok....

But she was alone then, poor and as light-hearted as a gull on the wing. Now she had an irreplaceable treasure at her breast, this tiny Jeří!

The two men and the girl were talking and joking loudly. Apparently it didn't matter at the moment that the girl was of senior rank. Both men—the lanky, even-tempered lieutenant, and the restless stocky private—were gaily teasing her and she blushed.

Margit knew a few Russian words and had a vague idea of what they were talking about. They were discussing mutual demobilized friends whom they had just seen off. They often mentioned the name of a military engi-

neer who, it was said, had a great liking for the girl-captain, and she, it seemed, was not uninterested in him either. Every time this engineer was mentioned the girl glowed with a happy flush. The wind played with her golden curls and her eyes sparkled.

Suddenly Margit discerned the word "hospital." Could it be that these people worked there?

She addressed herself to the girl who glanced at her attentively.

"You need help?" she queried.

"Yes. My kicsi—my child—is ill."

A hush fell over the company—the joking and the laughter ceased.

"This morning she was smiling and crowing. My husband and one of your officers took a military train out of here a few days ago. He's an engine-driver.... Do you happen to be a doctor?"

Margit bent forward and looked intently into the captain's eyes.

"Yes, I am a doctor," she replied, "and my comrades... they, too, are from our hospital."

She gently fingered the baby's forehead and promised Margit they would take care of the child at the hospital.

The wind became stronger and the waves tossed the boat higher and higher. The setting sun suddenly broke through the leaden skies away on the horizon and lit up the turbulent expanse of water and the undulating shore.

Margit was relieved. She thought the sun had gone down long ago, but there it was, dipping below the horizon only now. Sándor, the drunkard, rowed with gusto, the sweat streaming down his face. Bravo!

A load fell from Margit's shoulders. Things were turning out well! The girl-captain had promised to help Jeří. How pretty she was, attractive and neat! Her tender face, slender eyebrows, lips red and plump like a

child's. Margit found herself guessing the girl's age. So young—and already a doctor!

"You are very young for a doctor," she repeated aloud, and smiled for the first time that evening. "What a splendid profession: saving people's lives! They say it takes a lot of study to become a doctor."

"Yes," the girl replied after a pause, "we begin in our school-days and keep studying all our lives no matter where we may be.... Always."

"All your life? What a long time! That calls for patience and your teachers need even more! Who are your teachers?"

"The Soviet people, Stalin," the girl said proudly. "The homeland knows best how to teach people and help them out of difficulties."

True enough! Margit had become convinced of this ever since the Russian troops came to Balaton and drove away the fascists; they saved the lives of millions of men and women, brought them liberty and gave them a new lease of life. Had it not been for the Soviet Union, for its troops, both Vitez Molnar and his wife Margit would not have tasted the joys of liberty.

"I'll tell you a little story," the girl began with emotion, "and you'll get an idea of the love for man that fills Stalin's heart."

Margit was all attention, she had no great difficulty in getting the gist of the Russian, and she was moved, as if she had experienced all this herself.

In a village in the Soviet Union, far away in the steppe, there lived a woman, the wife of a collective farmer. It so happened that she was once stricken with grief, much as Margit was now: her little daughter whom she adored became dangerously ill. It was spring-time, days of bright sunlight and gentle breezes, when tractors rumbled in the fields and shepherds drove their flocks to distant pastures.

The village doctor was away at the time. He had gone to town on urgent business. The child's mother was at her wit's end. Her baby might die before the doctor returned. It was burning with fever, had difficulty in breathing and was blue in the face from crying. Her husband, a shepherd, was a long way off, tending his sheep and knew nothing about the misfortune. To whom could she turn for help? Who would help save her baby's life? "Stalin!" the thought flashed across the mother's mind. She rushed out in the dead of night, hurried across the dark steppe to the neighbouring railway-station and sent a telegram to the Kremlin: I am just a collective farmer's wife. My baby girl is dangerously ill, I implore you....

A few hours later when the mother, worn out with worry, drew near her house, she saw people fussing around a shining aeroplane at the edge of the village. A young professor with a bag in his hand, was hurrying to the bedside of the sick child....

"Oh, Stalin!" exclaimed the excited Margit. "Did he save the child?"

"Yes," the girl smiled, "the child was saved."

The dusk thickened and a drizzling rain set in. Margit took off her shawl and covered her daughter. The girl-captain offered her a rain-coat, but Margit said no—they had only one between the three of them.

"Don't worry about us," said the lieutenant, "we're waterproof," and, as he spoke, placed the rain-coat over Margit's shoulders.

Balaton was getting quite choppy. Rolling masses of water glistened dully around them. The waves beat against the sides of the boat and splashed the passengers.

Jeří woke up and began to whimper. Margit bent over her with anxiety and soothed her with loving words. Her tanned, still beautiful face and sparkling gipsy-like eyes

had so much motherly tenderness in them, that it seemed that this alone could make baby well.

But it only cried louder.

"We'll soon be there, soon," Margit whispered to it.

The soldier sitting on the lee side was suddenly drenched from head to foot by a wave.

"Br-r-r! Cold!" he yelled cheerfully, shaking himself, and then another mass of water, like the tail of an enormous fish, struck him squarely in the face.

The boat gave a lurch, and the passengers instinctively clutched the gunwales. Sándor shouted to them to let go and keep the boat balanced.

They had taken in a lot of water and the lieutenant set to bailing out with an old tin. Margit watched him in terror, and clasped the baby to her breast.

Lights twinkled in the hospital windows on the shore. They were nearly there, not more than half a kilometre to go, but Margit knew that in this gale the distance could become ten times greater.

She remembered that she wasn't a strong swimmer. And in any case she had never been in such deep water and in such rough weather. And what about baby? It was as helpless as a fledgeling in a nest.

Margit prayed aloud and fervently: "Jezus Maria, help us!"

The boat dropped now into troughs of dark water and at times rose high on the crest of a wave. Sándor kept it against the waves all the time. He'd been through this before.

The life-belt lay at the feet of the girl-captain. Margit watched it out of the corner of her eye, and she had the impression that all of them stole glances at it and had the same furtive thoughts. What else could they be thinking this bedlam of a night at the mercy of the blind, raging elements, tossed about like a cork in their frail and unreliable craft? How puny and helpless was the

boat compared with this host of dark, crested billows, the storm-clouds overhead, and the darkness and the fury of the tempest! The shore lights? But they were still a long way off. Five adult people in a boat? But they were powerless against the tempestuous rage of Balaton!

The blood-curdling tale of two Balaton fishermen—brothers—flashed through Margit's mind. A storm overtook them out on the lake; they had only one life-belt between them; they quarrelled for possession of it, grappled in a life-and-death struggle and went to the bottom fighting for the belt.

Margit shuddered. "What on earth am I thinking? That was a long time ago and in any case they were right out in the middle of Balaton.... We haven't got far to go."

But the boat didn't seem to be making any progress, it seemed to be rocking up and down in the same place.

They were wet to the bone. Only little Jeří was dry. She whimpered from under the rain-coat. The girl-captain and the private had joined the lieutenant at the bailing, using their caps.

They were three. At their feet lay the life-belt. Just one.

One! and five adults and little Jeří, and all of them wanting to live. Who would get the life-belt in the event of.... The strongest, of course, so thought Margit.

Another lurch, and again the soldier was drenched from head to foot.

The girl-captain straightened up and gazed intently at the lights on shore. Then she unfastened her holster and slowly drew out the pistol. What was she up to? Where was she aiming? Margit screamed. Pressing her lips grimly, the girl raised the pistol and fired three times into the air.

Maybe the shots would be heard on shore?

The reports, however, were smothered in the roar of the gale, in the boiling rage of the waves. How could anyone hear them!

The captain looked first at one and then the other of her companions.

"Who can swim?"

So she was thinking the same thoughts as Margit! She was young, she wanted to live, to love her engineer, to have children.... She had no desire to die tonight in the waters of Balaton! She's tortured by the same thoughts, thought Margit....

"I grew up on the Volga," said the private, "I can swim like a fish."

"I'm not too bad either," said the lieutenant.

"Neither am I," said the girl.

Although she said this quite firmly, the watchful Margit felt in the depths of her heart that this wasn't quite so. Clearly the girl wasn't such a strong swimmer, otherwise why question her companions. Anyhow, what was she up to?

Now it was Sándor's turn to be questioned.

"I'll manage if I have to!" he replied.

"And you?" said the girl, addressing Margit.

What was she after? Didn't she realize that Margit would go to the bottom at once with a child in her arms!

Now she was consulting with her comrades. Why were they whispering, what was on their minds?

The private lost no time, he calmly undid his boots in order to be ready. The girl picked up the life-belt.

So that was it....

"Should anything happen," she said, handing the life-belt to the thoroughly frightened Margit, "take this and put it on.... We'll take charge of the child. The lieutenant will take it."

What, part with her baby? What was she talking about?! Margit pressed the baby to her breast in desperation.

"I'll look after it," the lieutenant said, "I'm a father myself. It'll be perfectly safe with me. For fellows with legs as long as mine Balaton's only knee-deep."

Margit was silent.

"In the event of anything happening," the girl explained, "we'll take the child in turns. We'll hold it above water and we'll get ashore somehow, don't worry."

"Don't worry," repeated the private.

They were so sure of themselves, so remarkably unanimous about it, so strong and dependable, that Margit just couldn't resist. She surrendered the baby to them, and wondered how it was that she had consented to do so.

The lieutenant took hold of Jeří, and Margit took the life-belt, but she was ashamed to put it on.

The boat rolled and, as before, the spray struck their faces, only harder this time. But by now Margit's fright had almost disappeared.

During the brief moments when she thought that the five passengers were deadly enemies, Margit felt that the end had all but come; the raging elements seemed all-powerful, they paralyzed, choked and terrified her. But the moment she sensed that friendly support was at hand, this human and most reliable of life-belts, she snapped out of the grip of the elements. The roar of the terrible Balaton somehow wasn't quite so terrible and the shore lights were flying quickly to meet them.

Then, suddenly, the lights vanished.

Something struck the boat, it reared up, then plunged deep into the water, and a cold, heavy wave closed over the company. Somebody let out a yell, cursed gruffly, and Margit, losing presence of mind, groaned in utter despair:

"Jeří!"

She swallowed water, tumbled through blackness and grew numb with terror: the wet rubber tube had slipped out of her hands. This was the end! She wanted to retrieve the tube, stretched out her hands, but clutched only water. Then she felt something solid under her feet and impulsively stood up. The gale drove against her face; the shore was visible right ahead; the water was shallow! She gasped for breath, then another rush of water, mountains of it, and again darkness.... In an instant she was breathing again: the water receded to her shoulders and she heard voices at her side.

Where was Jeří?

A few steps away something black was groaning and floundering on the slippery bottom of the upturned boat; it seemed as if the figure was wrestling with itself. Margit guessed: Sándor!

The boat was pitching, but drifted shoreward.

Where were the others? Where was Jeří?

Somewhere in the darkness behind Margit the child shrieked, its voice piercing her like an electric current, and she turned instantly. She discerned figures in the troughs of the waves, she heard voices and heavy breathing and the plashing of hands against water. They were swimming! Blotches of faces, contours of shoulders, and, held above them, a dark, shrieking bundle. They vanished behind a huge wave, and then reappeared.... Margit turned impulsively to meet them, the bottom slipped from under her feet, and down she went again. "This, surely, is the end!"

An unknown force pulled painfully at her hair. She was out of the darkness, the wind tore at her and the shore lights were nearer. Jeří's shriek rang in her ear, then darkness enveloped her once more and she felt the deadly strangle-hold of water. Margit no longer had the

strength to struggle, she swallowed water, choked.... And again somebody's strong hand pulled her by the hair out into the wind and back to life, to the lights, to the precious voice of her baby.... How long had this lasted? She had lost all sense of time.

She only remembered how they waded ashore together, how someone helped her, how exhausted she was, almost unconscious, and how lightly her feet touched the bottom. Now, at last, she was able to breathe.

The girl held Jeří in her arms.

"Is she wet?" Margit asked.

"Never mind! She'll be all right!"

"Let me have her!"

"Not now, wait a little!..."

Each time a wave rolled over them the girl raised the child high over her head. She was supported on either side by the private and the lieutenant. The bottom was treacherous, and they moved forward carefully, feeling their way step by step. One would plunge into a hole, and the others would come to the rescue. The waves now ebbed away from them and now surged over their heads. The stocky private had the worst of things. He supported the captain with one hand and held Margit with the other. He swallowed more water than they, spluttered and sneezed, and swore loudly.

They waded shoulder to shoulder, twisting and turning in the seething cauldron. The water still swept over them, threw them aside and knocked them off their feet, but the worst was over. Sándor was in front pushing the overturned boat and shouting that he had found a shallow place.

Soon they, too, reached it. The water was chest-deep here. Sándor now hurled reproaches at Margit for losing the life-belt at the critical moment. He had it on his shoulder, having recovered it from the waves.

They waded shorewards.

Sándor stubbornly refused to leave the boat. Holding Margit with his right hand, he dragged the boat with his left, clanking the boat-chain.

The shore was now quite near. The lighted windows of the hospital loomed before them. The gale drove the grey breakers past the lights into the seething darkness beyond.

The sentries on guard at the hospital saw the group wading out of the lake. They turned on the searchlights and illuminated the shore.

The girl-captain shouted to them not to raise the alarm. Nothing extraordinary had happened, she said.

"I told you that nothing would happen," Sándor chirped in; he hadn't recovered from the scare as yet and was as white as chalk. But his lips were drawn into a grin. "Didn't I tell you that I'd get you here in the twinkling of an eye?"

Once out of the water and with the boat tied fast, they became conscious of the cold. The brightly-lit windows allured them with their promise of cosy warmth.

The girl-captain invited all of them to her quarters.

Margit took Jeří from her, kissed her baby and hugged it to her breast, and they walked briskly away from the lake. Sándor engaged in antics "to get the blood chasing through the veins," and everybody laughed.

A cry of joy from Margit made them stop: the child had smiled, she thought! It was getting better!

"Quite likely," the lieutenant cracked, "who wouldn't feel better after a bath like that!"

They were excited and cheerful. It turned out that the captain could hardly swim at all, but this only amused her irrepressible companions, and was the source of more wisecracks.

Margit was deeply moved by the girl-captain and her comrades. If it hadn't been for them, for these Soviet people, what would have become of her little Jeří and her-

self? They would have been drowned, without doubt! And she recalled the story the Russian girl had told her.

"Where is she now, the little collective farmer whose life was saved by Stalin?" Margit asked the girl.

The private and the lieutenant smiled.

"Why are you laughing?"

"The little collective farmer is right here before you," said the lieutenant and pointed to the captain: "There she is. . . ."

"You?" gasped the astonished Margit.

The girl smiled:

"Yes, I."

"But you said a little girl!"

"Yes, but the little girl has grown up."

They passed through a yard, up the steps of a high porch flanked by poplars, and then turned for another look at Balaton. The lake was still on the rampage. Launches, yachts and fishing-boats hugged the lee of the shore, driven there by the elements. Heavy rain was now falling, the poplars rustled and bent in the gale, which was blowing inland from the gloom and darkness of Balaton.

"And still we came off best!"

DANUBE SKETCH

In the summer of 1945, shortly after the war ended, I visited Budapest with a group of comrades belonging to our regiment. Our business was soon transacted, and, having time to spare, we decided to visit the scene of the battles in which our army had been engaged during the winter.

On the quay near the parliament building we boarded one of the motor-boats plying the Danube, and set off for Buda.

It was a glorious day. Swallows skimmed over the Danube, and the broad stream flowed peacefully under azure skies. Vessels of our Danube Flotilla lay alongside the quay and the sounds of accordion music floated in the air. It was hard to believe that only a few months ago guns were thundering here and that the granite embankments were crumbling under the tornado of artillery fire.

Sun-drenched Buda, perched on the high rocky hills, sprawled along the Danube, its monotonous grey immensity giving the impression of rows of gigantic skyscrapers.

On reaching the other bank we ascended the narrow streets through a chaos of demolished buildings. It was a depressing walk. There was the wilderness of ruins, the hum of the strange tongue spoken by the crowds in the queues, and none of our own people to be seen. Over in Pest we met cheerful compatriots at every step, on

the river we met the gallant sailors of our flotilla, but here in Buda there wasn't a trace of our men.

The queue-crowds fussed and chattered, vegetable vendors praised their wares and dust-covered girls with barrows were clearing the debris in the yards.

The stones were baking. That which from afar had given the impression of skyscrapers turned out to be nothing more than slum dwellings hewn out of the rock by centuries of toil.

Here among these slums we witnessed a scene which, I have no doubt, is clearly imprinted in the minds of each of my companions to this day.

At one of the street crossings we saw a boy of thirteen or fourteen in Soviet military uniform—the tunic showing the shoulder-straps of a sergeant, and cap at a rakish angle—surrounded by a crowd of people. Mountains of debris rose gloomily on either side, and down below, like a strip taken right out of the heavens, lay the clear, sparkling waters of the Danube.

My companion nudged me playfully, saying: "Wherever you go you're sure to find a Slav."

The lad was so absorbed in animated conversation that he failed to notice us. Sun-tanned, chubby-cheeked and as slender in the waist as a girl, he was telling his story with a carefree air, drawing occasional laughter and exclamations of surprise. Mothers with infants in their arms, a long-legged cobbler in his apron, and chance pedestrians, the latter decidedly intellectual in appearance, showered questions on the boy and scrutinized his slender figure in the well-fitting uniform, complete with pistol holster. A Guards badge and the For Valour medal gleamed on his chest.

All unnoticed by the young Guardsman, we stood and listened with suppressed smiles.

Unruffled by the questions deluged upon him in fragments of different languages, the boy replied easily, with

humour and with the poise and dignity of a seasoned soldier. To some he replied with a joke, to others with grave and profound mien. His audience wanted to know his age, how he had found his way to Buda, had he lost his way, did he need help to get out of the slums. They volunteered to show him the way to the commandant's office.

"I've been there, I know the way myself," he answered confidently. "I've marched half-way across Europe with my comrades, and I hardly think I'll get lost here."

The Hungarians smiled amiably and it was quite clear that they didn't believe all he said.

"What's your name?"

"Ivan!"

We wondered at the time whether this really was his name, or whether he was joking. But the crowd was delighted with Ivan.

"Oh, Ivan! *Khorosho*!* Maybe you are the son of a general?"

"I am the son of the regiment.... The fascists killed my father."

At this the women in the crowd voiced their sympathy, explaining his words to each other. But it baffled them how anyone could be the son of the regiment.

"Does that mean you're the regimental drummer?"

"No, not the drummer. I am the son of the regiment. A soldier," the boy replied proudly.

"Jezus Maria! So small and a soldier! What nationality are you?"

"That's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm of Soviet nationality."

"But surely the comrade sergeant is joking! There is no such nationality. We want to know where you were born."

"In the Ukraine. In Akhtyrka!"

* *Khorosho*—Russian for good.—*Tr.*

"Oh, the Ukraine! Akhtyrka!" the Hungarians repeated merrily. "Poltava, Cossack, gopak. . . ."

These words, apparently, exhausted their knowledge of the Ukraine. The boy was a bit nonplussed. The information they had about his native land, he apparently decided, was insufficient. So he supplemented:

"Taras Shevchenko. Ever heard of him?"

"Yes," someone called out.

"The Order of Khmelnitsky, heard of that?"

Silence.

"Dnieprostroy?"

Again silence.

"Or Kharkov tractors, have you seen them? They come from the Ukraine too."

More silence.

"Well, well. . . . You've still got to see things."

Then he was asked what he would do now, with the return of peace.

"I'll go to school," he said.

"Go to school," the audience interpreted for each other, "and who'll pay for your education? You said you had no father. . . ."

The boy shrugged his shoulders: these people didn't know the simplest facts.

"The state will pay," he explained.

"And who'll supply you with clothes?"

"The state."

"Oh, the s-t-a-t-e!"

Listening to this conversation we found ourselves thinking about the change that had taken place in the fortunes of the Ukrainian people. For years Westerners regarded the Ukraine as an exotic land of bewhiskered Zaporozhye Cossacks, with the inevitable gopak, the *tchoomak** on country roads and primitive rushlights in

* *Tchoomak*—Ukrainian ox-cart driver.—*Tr.*

the squalid huts of the peasants. They knew it also as an inexhaustible treasure chest in which, until October 1917, international imperialists rummaged, pumping out grain, iron-ore, coal and other choice pickings. In a word the imperialists regarded the Ukraine as a colony, conveniently situated at their very side; for them its people were white-skinned Negroes, to be exploited in the same way as the Negroes in America.

And here he stands, this free Soviet Ukrainian, having fought his way with his comrades across the Danube, with fronts that became known as "Ukrainian," and, to the amazement of these people, he spoke of his Republic as being a mighty industrial and collective-farm power, wholly and completely transformed and rapidly developing.

The incident gave us food for thought.

It wasn't just his words, it was the boy himself, this proud youngster from Akhtyrka who by his appearance amid the ruins of Buda announced to the world what he represented and the meaning of socialism which was already part of his life.

What would he have been if times had not changed?

In my mind's eye I see him as a shepherd with a wallet over his shoulder, his bare feet hacked and bleeding.... I see him running errands for his "own" and for foreign masters ... as the Mikolka in Teslenko's story, the same Mikolka who thirsted for knowledge but found the school doors closed to him.... I see him an apprentice, a miner's boy, the boy doing odd jobs in a shop, a young seasonal worker doomed to perpetual exploitation, ignorance and misery.

He might have been any of these....

But here he stands on the banks of the Danube, this son of the Soviet Ukraine, addressing an audience like a grown-up, patiently enlightening people about things that to him are as plain as daylight.

And so we made his acquaintance. He really was named Ivan and he had travelled from Vienna with a group of comrades to lay a wreath on the common grave of the Soviet warriors who fell in the battle for Budapest. Here, under the obelisk outside the parliament building lay many Guardsmen from his regiment.

The boy had become separated from his companions and would now return to Vienna alone.

We asked him if he really knew his way about.

"Don't worry about me, comrades! I took part in the storming of Pest and in the liberation of Buda. I know every stone in this city."

... Whenever I see the columns of Suvorovtsy* marching down the streets in my native city I always look out for this genial lad who is now one of them, for this representative of the new generation of Ukrainians, this son of the Guards regiment.... But it would be difficult to recognize him now. Because all of them, all those boys marching in serried ranks along the highroad to a splendid future, with a clear goal in front of them, are so like him. All of them are sons of the great and united Soviet regiment!

* *Suvorovtsy*—pupils of the Suvorov Military Schools.—*Tr.*

ILONKA

On Sunday morning Ilonka fluttered out of the house in her white dress, radiant and lively as a butterfly. She laughed, glowing with happiness. The warm atmosphere had a kind of silky softness and waves of joy flowed over her. The skies and the earth itself seemed to be conscious of the holiday.

Father's smithy was closed. The neighbours' flails were silent. No clumsy carts creaked on the road from the fields laden with golden sheaves. The sun beamed cheerfully out of the blue of the sky and the sounds of organ music floated from the church.

Sergeant Loshakov was assiduously shining the cracked leather of his boots in front of the house, an array of cloths and brushes laid out before him. His comrade, the kind and jovial Lukich, was washing under the pump.

" 'Morning, Loshakov! 'Morning, Lukich!" Ilonka greeted them sedately, and they replied with broad grins:

"Good morning!"

How good it is to have friends like these two. All the youngsters in St. Istvan agree that Ilonka has every right to be proud that the commandants live in her house, that her mother cooks dinner for them and her father, Stefan the blacksmith, smokes and chats with them every evening just like a brother.

Father chats mostly with Lukich, the one now beckoning Ilonka to pump water for him.

Running to the pump, Ilonka willingly clutches the warm iron handle. Her black eyes sparkle with joy. She'd gladly pump a whole lakeful if Lukich would ask her! Fresh, pure spring water it would be! Let him wash off the scars lining his chest from side to side. But they won't wash off: they're from fascist shrapnel. Who knows, the cruel shrapnel may have been meant for Ilonka's heart, but Lukich stopped it with his breast.

Early that spring, when the battle still raged in St. Istvan, Ilonka saw an unknown Soviet soldier die on the threshold of the dug-out in which she and the others were taking shelter. Somehow that soldier had resembled Lukich. His body had been riddled by shell splinters and he was buried in the centre of the village in the mass grave. The grave is now a mound of flowers, planted by the girls of St. Istvan.

The tide of battle swept on. For months past no bombs have fallen on green St. Istvan, the deadly shrapnel no longer whizzes through the yard. Ilonka's father has long since put in new window glass, and Lukich serenely soaps his hardened, tightly-drawn scars. How wonderful without war!

Like Ilonka's father, Lukich washes thoroughly on Sundays, soaps himself over and over again, cups his hands under the pump and splashes the water in a wide circle. Then he grunts with satisfaction and gives himself a rub down with his army towel for ever so long, rubs this way and that until his sun-tanned, scarred body glows red as pepper.

"How goes it, Lukich?"

Raising her head, Ilonka looks at her demi-god brightly and cheerfully.

"Fine, lassie, fine.... Excellent!"

"What is 'ex-cel-lent'?"

Instead of explaining the new Russian word Lukich gives her a light tap on the forehead. The impish Ilonka is delighted.

The organ is louder now.

Peasants stream past Stefan's yard on their way to the church. They nod gravely to the Soviet military. Never before has the blacksmith's yard known such respect.

Ilonka is going up and up in her own esteem.

The elderly peasants greet Lukich first, then Loshakov. But the rosy-cheeked peasant girls reverse the order. Their eyes are glued to the young sergeant. They stumble, they blush and they pull their gaily-coloured shawls up to the eyebrows.

Ilonka knows why their cheeks are crimson. When the village youth gather for the dance down by the lake on a Sunday afternoon, all the girls are dying to dance with Loshakov. But he shows no preference for any of them—he dances with his sub-machine gun instead, embracing it as tenderly as if it were a girl. The spectators laugh uproariously at his antics, but Loshakov himself doesn't laugh. He knows how to joke with a straight face.

Lukich doesn't dance at all. That's nothing to be surprised about, because he's no longer a youngster and has an eight-year-old Ilonka of his own at home, only they pronounce her name in an odd sort of way: Alyonka.

In his spare time Lukich helps Ilonka's father in the smithy. Clenching their teeth, they pound the red-hot ploughshares with their hammers, and when the job is done they sit and talk about everyday things such as the soil and the vineyards which used to belong to the Count, and which are now the property of the people. When the land was being distributed among the peasants, mother didn't want to take their share. Somebody had whispered that the old times would return the mo-

ment the Soviet commandants left St. Istvan. Lukich laughed loudly. Father allayed her fears.

"Bezsika," he said, "who can turn the clock back if we say no? Don't worry about the Count: the people in Budapest have packed him off to prison for being a war criminal. Maybe you think some of his heirs will return from abroad? What a hope! If it comes to that, then every true Hungarian will become a commandant and show them a thing or two!"

That was how father put it. Wise and simple. Everything is taking a turn for the better.

The sharp, humid smell of young wine comes from the cellar. Today, the first post-war festival of the grapes, it will flow in rivers. On a day like this even little Ilonka will have a sip!

"Ilonka," Loshakov calls the girl, shutting his tin of shoe-polish, "let Lukich look after himself. Come and let's sing 'Katyusha'."

"At the top of our voices?" Ilonka asks.

"Of course!"

The girl squeals with delight and claps her hands:

"Come on, let's sing...."

But they don't. The lieutenant comes into the yard and Loshakov and Lukich spring smartly to attention.

Lieutenant Vechirko, a taciturn well-built youth with high cheek-bones and set jaw, always, even on holidays, makes people think in terms of the job in hand. With him duty always comes first. That's as it should be, for he is the senior commandant of St. Istvan. Loshakov and Lukich are, so to speak, only the garrison. Clearly the open-hearted Istvanites are not quite correct when they designate all three at blacksmith Stefan's as "commandants." Not that that changes anything!

The lieutenant has already been out and about despite the early hour. He has his hands full from morning till night, seeing to things in this remote, out-of-the-way

Hungarian village. The responsibility for the well-being of its population is his, and for Ilonka's too.

But Ilonka doesn't get on with the lieutenant in the same way that she does with Lukich and Loshakov, although he speaks Hungarian better. The ceaseless flow of visitors with their complaints and proposals, and the urgent matters—all these take the lieutenant's time and seem to fence him off from Ilonka, making it difficult for her to approach him. Although she sees him every day, they are, nevertheless, almost strangers.

Even now Vechirko takes no notice of the imp dressed in her Sunday best. He gives curt words of command to Loshakov. He's sending the sergeant somewhere, it appears.

Loshakov slings his gun over his shoulder and wheels out his bicycle.

Where is he going? If he's going to the Count's woods he'll bring back the mail and a bagful of magazines, newspapers, and cigarettes and things. Lots of Loshakovs and Lukiches are camped in the woods with horses, tanks and guns. On sunny days they can be seen from the top of the hill on the other side of the village, doing exercises. It may be that he's going to town. If so, he won't be back until evening and he'll be sure to have sweets in his pocket for Ilonka.

"It's not so easy being a commandant!" Ilonka sighs, intently watching Loshakov who is now speeding down the street, scaring the sleepy hens. Even on a day like this when everybody is drinking wine and singing songs, he's got to be armed and ready at a moment's notice to go wherever he's sent, and protect and care for everybody.

Nor was it long before the lieutenant found a job for Lukich. He took the latter's gun, turned it over in his hands, squinted down the barrel and spotted what he took to be stains. That was all he needed. Clean it, Lukich!

Entering the house, he seated himself at the table and, with a serious look on his face, concentrated on the papers in his satchel.

Lukich hums good-naturedly as he lays out his kit and takes his gun to pieces. Another might have grumbled, but for Lukich the lieutenant's word is law.

Ilonka knows that the trio—Vechirko, Loshakov and Lukich—are comrades of long standing. One evening Lukich had told father and the neighbours about the lieutenant. Ilonka had been listening, she memorized the story, and the senior commandant had risen immeasurably in her eyes.

Soviet soldiers were storming a steep, rocky height. The lieutenant was in command. Loshakov and Lukich were there too. The lieutenant was wounded early on, but he refused to go back and continued to lead the attack. And when hit a second time he ordered: "Carry me forward." Loshakov and Lukich were among those who carried him. Half-way up the hill the lieutenant was wounder a third time. Yet he insisted on being carried forward. They took him right up to the top of the hill.

In her mind's eye Ilonka has a clear vision of this unknown hill. Her imagination pictures it as high and as bare as the hill just outside St. Istvan, which, like a barren islet, towers above the sea of verdant vineyards. The St. Istvan hill, too, was stormed a little while back by Soviet soldiers, and it might well have been up its steep slopes that Loshakov and Lukich had carried their gallant lieutenant.

Ilonka can hardly believe that a man of the lieutenant's calibre is now sitting in her house. He is absorbed in his papers, completely oblivious of the dark-haired imp constantly running past his window.

"Lukich!" she calls.

"Yes."

"What did you see when you carried him to the top of the hill?"

"What hill?"

"The hill that you stormed," she explains.

"Oh, that.... Vineyards, Ilonka, vineyards!"

* * *

After church Stefan told the lieutenant about the rumours brought to St. Istvan by distant parishioners. It was said that in a farmstead away beyond the Mór, the police had caught a Szalasi bandit. They said that a gang of bandits had come from Budapest to waylay and assassinate Soviet soldiers travelling singly on lonely roads, strip them of documents, medals and uniforms, and use these for their sinister ends.

"The reptiles are raising their heads, you must be careful!" said the blacksmith, not without agitation.

But contrary to Stefan's expectations, the lieutenant wasn't greatly impressed by this astounding news. Neither was Lukich. They just looked at each other knowingly, and old Lukich drew his fist across his moustache. It appeared they knew about it, knew much more than Stefan.

But the other guests buzzed like a disturbed beehive. What was this? Are the scoundrels creeping out of their holes again? Do they want to bring fresh disasters on the country and on our children?

"Nothing doing!"

"They won't dare!"

With their tanned and horny hands, the peasants clinked their wine-jugs unanimously. The tall, broad-shouldered Stefan stood up, almost touching the ceiling with his head. The others followed his example.

"Let's drink to peace!"

"To our hope—the Soviet Union!"

"To the health of all who don't want war!"

The house was full of guests. Stefan's brothers had come with their wives, sons and daughters. The hospitable Bezsika had her hands full running to the cellar for wine. Her whole being was concentrated on serving others, on making them feel at home. It was clear that the role of hostess gave her no end of satisfaction.

Ilonka, the picture of health and beauty, was seated between her cousins. Her wavy, jet-black plaits fell to her shoulders just like the plaits of a big girl.

Her lack of years meant that she could not take part in the conversation, but she absorbed everything the grown-ups said, and, in spirit at least, joined in the toasts and cursed those whom her numerous tribe of relatives damned so unanimously.

Terrible words of some kind of threat to the country and the children came to Ilonka from the confusion of agitated voices, but in the midst of this noisy amity and mutual trust she could hardly conceive of any danger. She had nothing to fear in this wonderful world where there was so much joy and gladness, so many people, big, clever and strong, who, from commandant to wheat-grower, said the same things and took the same vow. Wouldn't it be better not to speak about war at all? How can there be wars when nobody wants them?

What a pity that Loshakov isn't here, and that his glass didn't clink melodiously with the others. Where had he gone? Why hadn't he come back?

Ilonka's eyes darkened, her brow clouded, but then the tambourine rang out dully and she was radiant in an instant. The tambourine was summoning the villagers to the carnival. It was time to go!

The guests began to get ready. Rushing into the yard with her cousins, Ilonka raised her clear voice in a song to the tune of the popular Russian "Katyusha."

* * *

The gay and boisterous carnival crowd surged into the narrow alley to the accompaniment of tambourines and cymbals, they passed through the village into the open, into the bright expanse of cornfields and vineyards.

We bow to you, mother earth, yielder of harvests!

Here, under the lavish sunlight of the long summer, on the countless vines, there ripened heavy bunches of grapes, to the joy of the husbandmen. This year the soil rewarded the villagers generously for their unremitting labour. The harvest has been gathered, and the unburdened vines rest on their props, intertwining their thick foliage.

The carnival shifts down the dusty field-path between the vineyards. Gaily bedecked horses, harnessed to a tall cart with a huge oaken wine cask, head the procession. Girls dressed as white nymphs, with wreaths and garlands, sit around the cask. Each has a jug in her hand. Ilonka is among them.

The tireless musicians follow the cart, and in the wake of the musicians groups of dancers who raise clouds of dust.

Their path leads to the neighbouring Slovak village of Postavtsi. It's a time-honoured custom to round off the day by visiting the wine-growers and ploughmen of Postavtsi, men as tanned and as sinewy as themselves. The Postavtsi people will also turn out in full force to meet their neighbours on the road, and then until the small hours of the morning, on the meadow under the luminous stars they will sing their songs and dance their dances to the mirthful ring of the tambourines.

But of that anon. Meanwhile, the road is black with people, the carnival is at its height, and Ilonka in her white dress stands out against the sea of black, broad-rimmed hats. She soars like a gull above the crowd, like a beautiful vision raised and carried away by the forest

of dark, toil-worn hands. The skies above her are fabulously blue. Ilonka sees far away to the horizon; it seems to her that she is floating on air laden with happiness, flying over the lacery of the plantations, over the yellow of the stubble and the battered German tanks which here and there still can be seen in the fields. Away to the left are the dark outlines of the high hills, the slopes of which are covered with vineyards. How she wishes she could climb up there!

Ilonka keeps her eyes open for Lukich and the lieutenant. They are right in the centre of the festivities. How could they refuse, seeing that the whole village had invited them!

Ilonka waved to the commandant, inviting him to the barrel. He hasn't tasted the wine yet!

"Do come, lieutenant! Let's drain glasses!"

And although he is deep in the heart of the crowd it seems to Ilonka the lieutenant is right beside her. Never has she felt so free and easy with him. He answers her gaily over the heads of the people; she doesn't hear a single word in the din, but it seems to her that she's had a wonderful conversation with him, better than all the conversations that she had planned and longed for, and which never took place. She had the impression that the lieutenant told her all his secrets, and that she could now explain and even enlarge on the heroic things that Lukich told about him.

What a pity that Loshakov hasn't come yet! He, too, should be enjoying himself. After all, he deserves it! Did he not protect these vineyards which have brought the people so much gaiety and laughter? At night, while St. Istvan sleeps, Loshakov and Lukich make their rounds, seeing to it that no enemy gets into the vineyards, guarding the slumber of the peaceful dwellings. Mother often said to Ilonka when turning down the lamp: "Go to sleep, little one, have no fear." And

nodding at the window, she would say: "Loshakov and Lukich are on guard."

One could depend on them. They had proved their mettle in the heavy fighting in the spring, bravely tackling the enemy tanks and liberating village after village from the hated nazis.

"Ilonka, let's have a jugful, we're thirsty!" The girls, flushed and breathless after dancing, crowd around the cart. Their healthy faces glisten with perspiration. Ilonka and her companions quickly fill the jugs with golden wine:

"Your health!"

The girls throw the dregs high into the air.

"Ilonka!" cries one of them with a laugh, wiping her lips. "Where's Loshakov?"

"He helped us gather the grapes and stack the grain," another adds jokingly. "We promised him a drink!"

Jokes! Laughter! Impish sparkling of dark eyes!

And where, indeed, can he be all this time?

Actually at this very time he wasn't far away. He was riding quickly with important news from the town commandant, along a deserted path running through the vineyards. Swallows pursued him, diving and gambolling in their flight. The quickly-turning spokes of the bicycle wheels shone like silver in the white September sun.

Then, all of a sudden, something struck the sergeant painfully below the knee. A soft report sounded in the vineyards. Loshakov pedalled on for a few yards until he saw the blood trickling down the top of his boot. He jumped off, gripped his sub-machine gun, and, overcoming the pain, raised himself on tiptoe. There was no one to be seen, nothing but a limpid, sticky silence, glaring heat and the mysterious rolling greenery of the endless vineyards. And then came a second report. This time the bullet whizzed past Loshakov's ear. He cursed,

and crouched instinctively: he had spotted a thin wisp of smoke in a clump of bushes a little way off. Aiming carefully, he directed a short burst there from his gun.

The lieutenant was the first to hear the firing. His trained ear, it seemed, was constantly on the alert for such sounds.

"Listen!"

Vechirko cut the air with his hand as if issuing an order, and the music stopped.

Shadows darkened the faces of the stunned holiday-makers. They stood motionless, and an ominous silence descended on them.

What did those shots mean?

The lieutenant and Lukich listened intently, taking in the vicinity with their eyes. Perched atop the wine-barrel, jug in hand, Ilonka didn't dare bother her commandants at a moment like this: they had become so serious, concentrated, and inaccessible.

The tension grew. The women whispered to one another, while the men raised their voices in anger. Even those who had had a drop too much sobered immediately. They all wanted to know the meaning of the shots in the vineyards.

"For whom is our holiday not a holiday?"

The lieutenant and Lukich headed towards the vineyards, talking in low tones as they went. The crowd followed them. This was no longer a carnival procession. It was a crowd, boiling with anger. Watchful eyes scanned the surroundings.

The wine-cask was deserted. The horses followed the crowd unguided. The empty jugs, abandoned on the bottom of the cart, jingled desolately against each other. The white nymphs joined the grown-ups, forgetting their gay carnival duties.

"Hold on! What's that?"

Ilonka turned cold: she saw Loshakov's bicycle lying in the middle of the road, and, throwing up her hands, shouted in despair:

"Loshakov's been killed!"

But Loshakov heard them and rose from behind the bushes. Alive, perspiring, covered with dust from head to foot, he beckoned to the lieutenant.

In a moment the people were milling around him, casting excited looks at him. Ilonka felt the ground give under her at the sight of the sergeant. The bullet-hole in the blood-smeared boot, the leg hurriedly bound with his belt, the dusty chocolate sticking out of the sergeant's pocket—all this was alarming, mysterious, inexplicable.

Loshakov made a laconic report to the lieutenant.

A threatening rumble surged through the crowd, piercing Ilonka to the marrow. She felt a raging force mounting inside her. The criminal couldn't be far away! He was here somewhere, crawling in the bushes like a snake. Maybe it was one of the scoundrels that wanted war! The rumours were now confirmed, the danger had become near and perceptible.

Ilonka clenched her tiny fists with determination: "Find him quickly! Destroy him!"

The crowd roared. Breathing heavily, they pulled the sturdy vine-props out of the ground. Someone waved a rod torn out of the side of the cart. A gardening knife gleamed in the hands of another.

"Keep calm," said the lieutenant, as he carefully examined the dense bushes from which the criminal had fired.

"This is the place," the sergeant stated, "but when I got here he had disappeared."

The track led westwards through the bushes.

They had to act quickly. The prudent Lukich had a first-aid kit in his pocket. Bezsika and some of the other women began to bandage Loshakov's wound. The lieu-

tenant quickly formed the others into groups, appointed leaders and sent them to comb the vineyards. It was essential to catch the criminal before nightfall.

"If we don't," Ilonka heard someone say, "he'll escape in the darkness."

The wine-cask was abandoned. All wanted to take part in the search.

Spreading out in a big circle, the people gradually closed in, combing every bush as they moved forward. Who was he? What ill wind had brought him to their parts? Why did he shoot at the sergeant?

The people had but one answer to these questions: only a fascist, a war criminal and warmonger could have lifted his hand against the Soviet sergeant. This was enough to excite the peaceful citizens of St. Istvan. They were no longer thinking of Loshakov, but of their own future. All the horrors of war, imprinted on their memories swam before their eyes, shutting out the joys of the interrupted festival, kindling an urgent wish to capture the hated assailant.

They were tracking him down like a beast. With stakes in their hands. Eyes agleam with excitement. Men and women, boys and girls. The ring of hunters tightening.

Lieutenant Vechirko, Lukich, Stefan and a group of peasants followed the trail left by the fleeing enemy. He was wounded, apparently, for they found traces of fresh blood on the ground.

Ilonka was at her father's side. She tugged impatiently at his hand, urging him forward:

"If we don't find him, he'll get away in the dark."

It was getting late. The vineyards covered a huge area of dozens of hectares. But they had to go slowly and carefully: the criminal might turn any minute, and start shooting. Besides, the bushes were high and dense, and they couldn't see very far.

"Hold me up, Papa, I'll look around," Ilonka suggested.

"He'll see you and shoot you. You're in white."

"But he'll get away! Then there'll be war...."

Stefan turned his daughter's words over in his mind, stroking her pretty head.

"... They'll burn everything, destroy everything. We'll have to sit in cold and dirty dug-outs, waiting for a bomb to drop on our heads. Oh, Jezus Maria!"

The blacksmith's face darkened. He raised himself on the tips of his toes, looked into the thick vines. No, couldn't see far that way!

"All right.... Come!"

He seated Ilonka on his shoulders.

"Take a good look. If you don't, he'll kill us."

Ilonka looked intently over the plantation. But she saw nothing suspicious anywhere. She exclaimed impatiently:

"He has got away, I suppose!"

The villagers advanced in a wide arc, walking breast-high in thick greenery. It was good being together, shoulder to shoulder. They were not afraid!

The sun was going down and shadows appeared between the bushes.

Would he escape?

A shiver ran through Ilonka suddenly, and she wound her arms around her father.

"What's the matter, Ilonka?"

"I see him!"

Stefan crouched down at once, but Ilonka pleaded:

"Don't, father, keep standing or I won't be able to see him."

"Where is he?"

"Over there. Stand up."

Stefan obeyed, holding Ilonka with both hands on his shoulders.

The criminal had gone a long way. He was making quickly for the depths of the ravine, trying to keep in the shade, spurting clumsily from clump to clump.

Ilonka watched him with bated breath. Ragged, bare-headed, the nails of his boots gleaming in the setting sun, he was creeping away like a wounded wolf. Now and again he would stop and look back, and the girl clearly saw his pale repulsive face, distorted by fear.

So that's what a warmonger looks like? He wants to kill people, trample on the vineyards, drive Ilonka and her family into the earth?—What a hope!

Father was panting as he hurried after the lieutenant:

"Do you still see him, Ilonka?"

"Yes."

"Keep your eyes on him. Watch him!"

"I'm watching!"

The lieutenant walked ahead silently, pistol in hand. Lukich gripped his sub-machine gun. Ilonka felt safe with them.

They strode on, faster and faster.

"You haven't lost sight of him?"

"No."

Far away in the stillness of the evening the sounds of a tambourine rang out. Apparently the good citizens of Postavtsi were coming down the road to meet them.

THE MOUNTAINS SING

1

The war had ended. The booming of the victory salutes died down.

The division was camped in the mountains in a spacious alpine valley surrounded by cliffs and trees. The regimental buglers blew their trumpets gaily into the skies. The vigorous neighing of unsaddled horses echoed through the hills. The men settled down to a life of peace.

The regiments stretched for several kilometres, camp after camp, along the edge of a hollow. Vehicles and guns stood in long ranks at the bottom of the ravine. The long grass covered their wheels.

The sergeants had gone to the neighbouring villages for tools and instruments which they would borrow against written receipts.

Officers were marking off tent sites. An order had been issued to set up light, temporary dwellings. But the Guards architects, full of inspiration, were putting up regular winter houses. They wanted to do everything well, to build solidly, even if only needed for a single day. This wasn't just ordinary work; it was the thrill of doing things, the all-powerful, masterly passion of eager hands long starved for work. Not a camp, but a well laid out white township arose in the valley to the astonishment of the peasantry.

Tidy, whitewashed blocks sprang up on the green plateau in next to no time. Everyone wanted to demonstrate

his talents to the best advantage. The nimble fingers of the soldier hands could do everything. Sun-tanned mowers were cutting swathes on the future quadrangle, rhythmically swinging their scythes, and faces aglow with elation. One of the officers had become electrician, a sergeant had turned carpenter, while a famous sniper displayed skill as an artist. They were running cables to the tents, digging wells, breaking stones for the paths and wielding their hammers with the ease of miners.

In the surrounding villages the day began and ended to the tune of this symphony of labour, which resounded without let-up for several days.

The job was finished at last. The sergeants put the tools in shape and returned them to their owners.

The flag of the Soviet Union was raised over the camp.

Drill was on strictly by time-table. On to the quadrangle at the sound of one signal, off to the tents at the sound of another! They sang as they went, and sang when they returned. The regiments and the villagers soon learned to check the time by these signals.

II

"We'll sing the national anthem with the other units after roll-call today," the leading sergeant of No. 3 Rifle Company announced solemnly, walking up and down the line of his men in his brightly-polished boots.

"We used to sing in companies," he continued, "now we shall sing in regiments. The band on the right will be our conductor. We've got to take first place for singing, so let's show our voices to good purpose."

The sergeant paused and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Don't forget, the machine-gunners will be on our left; they've got chaps with good voices. We beat

them in field practice, and if we don't do the same here...."

The sergeant dropped his hand, cutting short his harangue. This meant that he didn't want even to think it possible.

"Look after your voice as you look after your rifle," he said, puffing out his chubby, clean-shaven cheeks threateningly. "But to our regret there are those among us who don't seem to know that. I'm referring to you, Private Pereima, and to you, Corporal Snezhkov. D'you think I didn't see the two of you dodge off after dinner? Been to the springs again? You like your water cold, don't you? The rest of us drink from containers, but not you chaps. The water in the containers isn't to your taste, it's tepid, smells of disinfectant. So you go to the mountains for ice-cold water, and then you get sore throat and lose your voices. You're probably hoarse already, Snezhkov? Let's hear you."

"I'm not hoarse," said Snezhkov, and his voice rang out clearly.

"And you, Pereima?"

"I'm all right!" he replied in a voice as clear as a bell.

This seemed to pacify the sergeant. But his all-seeing eye wandered over the ranks, seeking someone else, and found him in the back row:

"Svetlichny!"

"Here!"

The little round-faced, snub-nosed soldier blushed at the sound of his own voice.

"You too.... I didn't expect that from you, Svetlichny! You're a sniper, member of the Komsomol, and you have a voice like an opera star's, you go off to the hills as well!"

"I didn't go there to drink water."

Svetlichny's comrades backed him up:

"He went to pick flowers for our tent!"

"Well, if that's all you did it's all right with me," said the mollified sergeant. "I rely on you, Svetlichny. Although you're among the shortest you'll stand in the middle of the company this time. We have singers like Zagoruiko: notes mean nothing to him, he's got no discipline. He starts off with the rest, then wanders off on his own. Spoils everything. Svetlichny, I shall put you next to Zagoruiko. He'll follow you.... D'you hear, Zagoruiko? No running ahead and no wandering off.... Listen to Svetlichny. He'll adjust the fire of your battery, so to speak."

III

Victor Svetlichny wanted his company to take first place for singing. So that same evening he mirthlessly warned Zagoruiko:

"Look out, pal. The moment you get out of tune I'll stamp on your toes!"

Zagoruiko, who was a head taller than Svetlichny, smiled good-naturedly and promised his undergrown tutor that he would "keep time."

The machine-gunners were coughing somewhere in the dark, and Svetlichny took this as a personal challenge, as a bit of comradely swashbuckling, and he wanted to get the better of them, to out-sing them at all cost.

The companies lined up before the camp. After the roll-call the sergeants ran off, one after the other, to report to the officers on duty. They heard the loud and clear reports of the near-by regiments, the barely audible ones on the distant flanks.

Dark mountain peaks towered in front, reaching for the stars. The rocks, heated by the sun during the day, breathed a caressing warmth, while a fresh coolness rose from the dew on the grass.

At last the reports were completed. The detachments were on the alert. The band struck up the national an-

them, and the entire valley, from end to end, took it up with its thousands of voices. The melody, rapidly swelling and gathering strength, brimmed over into a harmonious ocean of melody.

Conscious of the sergeant's order to keep an eye on Zagoruiko, Svetlichny listened to him intently for a while, and jealously compared the voices of his company with those of the machine-gunners. But this didn't last long. Gripped by the compelling power of the anthem, he was soon oblivious to the world. He was entranced by the melody and seemed to become part of it.

He felt his entire being lifted by a current of unusual energy, charmed by the captivating beauty of the sounds. He had the impression that he wasn't singing, that the song flowed of itself, expressing his thoughts and feelings about those near and dear to him, about his beloved country, more precious to him than anything else in the world and now so far away. The song conveyed everything: the rhythm of the mighty march, all the grimness of battle and the exultation of victory, the powerful fanfares of the future. Everything he lived for appeared before him, transmuted into buoyant music. He sang about himself, about his young life which came to maturity in battles and campaigns. His life, it appeared to him, was embodied in this music, gained the force of a song, turned into an anthem!

He knew that now his song would be heard not only here in this high alpine camp; it was everywhere. In the north and in the south, in all the countries where Soviet regiments were quartered, the majestic choir of the victors would be heard at this evening hour.

Over hill and dale they called to each other, these sentries of the homeland, with the strains of this proud music, this solemn song. Svetlichny could clearly hear the distant brotherly choirs beyond the horizon. He sang for them and with them.

Where now was the little sniper who just couldn't learn to throw his cigarette stubs into the camp bins? The sergeant wouldn't have recognized him at this moment.

Svetlichny forgot about Zagoruiko and about the rival machine-gunners. They no longer existed for him. They had vanished, like the rustling of leaves vanishes in the roar of the forest. A single passionate flood-tide of music flowed among the rocks, penetrating to the deepest crevices and rolling over the valley. The festive melody asserted itself everywhere.

And when the sounds subsided and the sergeants took their men to the tents, it seemed to Svetlichny that the singing was continued in the mountains.

"Boys, you sang wonderfully," said the sergeant just before "lights out."

"How did I do?" Zagoruiko asked, nudging Svetlichny; they were bunking together, side by side.

"Let Svetlichny tell us...."

"What's there to say!" Svetlichny laughed. "I think he did well. To be frank, I didn't hear him, nor did I hear myself for that matter."

"Well then, what did you hear?"

"I heard everybody!"

This admission didn't surprise the sergeant.

"Maybe you won't believe me," he confessed suddenly, "but something came over me today. The moment the song began it gripped me, and everything else evaporated into thin air. Really, I'm telling the truth. Good night, lads!"

Svetlichny couldn't sleep. The powerful melody still rang in his ears, nervous shivers ran down him. He saw the dark mountains gradually disappear behind low white clouds, and he listened intently.

He fancied he heard the mountains singing softly.

Was it an echo?

IV

The next evening he became convinced that the mountains really were singing.

Later on they found out that the song of the regiments had been heard far beyond the bounds of the camp. All the surrounding villages, above and below, knew the time of the roll-call now, the time of the big song. At this hour the local people came out into the open. They turned off their radios and gramophones and listened to the mountains as if they were gigantic loudspeakers, waiting for the first strains of the military band.

And when the regiments began to sing, when the high singing plateau appeared to float on the wings of melody out of the velvet blue of the evening, the numerous listeners gradually became singers themselves. The girls somehow or other got the notes at the camp and multiplied it by hand.

More and more youthful voices, male and female, joined the symphony. At first they didn't do very well and sang in half-tones, but they quickly gained confidence and their song became louder and louder.

Even after the division broke camp and headed for other parts, when they left their well-kept alpine camp forever, with its tents and flower-beds, its wells and paths, even then the melody remained.

At the usual hour for roll-call the mountains began to sing.

THE SOUTH

THE RAPIDS

The boat was steaming down the Dnieper. The breeze wafted the sweet freshness of the expanse of water, and the pungent scent of the distant steppe.

Day broke quickly. The passengers began to move about. Two old men who had snored lustily during the night sitting back-to-back in the warmth of the smoke-blackened funnel, were the first on their feet. A group of N.C.O.'s, who had slept in a cosy bunch in the middle of the deck, folded their greatcoats with habitual thoroughness. Peering into their mirrors, the girls occupying the benches powdered their noses and kept up a lively chatter with a robust, elderly collective-farm woman who was perched on an overturned wicker basket. Her fellow-villagers, stretched out among similar baskets, were sound asleep.

"Off on vacation, I suppose?" the elderly woman inquired softly, looking at the girls with undisguised interest.

One of them sighed faintly:

"No, auntie.... We have appointments: We're going to teaching jobs."

"Is that so?... Teachers? And I took you for students. There were lots of them on the boat last week. It's a sight for sore eyes to see all the people that are studying now!"

The woman got up from her seat—tall and buxom—and smoothed her dress unhurriedly.

She looked at the rose-tinted east and yawned loudly.

Stepping carefully over the legs of her companions she drew nearer to the girls. She stood there in their midst, like a mother among her daughters, in a new green jacket buttoned to her neck, and a kerchief, immaculately white and becoming, fringing her tanned, weather-beaten, wrinkled face.

"I've been at a conference in town," the woman said with a restrained smile. "I was a dairymaid before the war, and for the past three years I've been managing the cattle farm. I know the ropes, they say. I've been away since Tuesday and feel as though it's been a month. I feel almost homesick. Met them on the pier," she nodded at the sleeping women by the baskets, "they laughed at me when I asked them how the calves were getting on. They've been to the market with the collective-farm apricots. We are saving up to buy a new launch.... May I sit down?"

She moved one of the girls' suitcases without further ado, and sat down on the edge of the bench.

The east was aglow and the sky brightened, rising, as it were, out of the night to meet the ship. The pure, early-morning air had a fragrant freshness. Buoy-keepers plied the fairway in their fragile boats, putting out the dim signal lights.

"How wide the Dnieper is in these parts!" a white-faced, lively girl with thin shoulders exclaimed delightedly. "Last night when we went to bed the banks were quite close! But look at the distance between them now...."

"And how flat they are!" another added. "You can see for miles and miles!"

"Wide and spacious—it's breath-taking!" chimed in a third.

"We are going down Lake Lenin," said the woman. "We'll come to the rapids soon."

"Rapids?" the students crowded around her excitedly. "How interesting! You mean *the* rapids?!"

"Yes, *the* rapids.... As a matter of fact they begin right here."

A hush descended on the girls. They gave their minds to things of the long ago, things that had been honoured in song and story, things that flavoured of the romantic. The Dnieper rapids! Here they were, submerged in the water, the level of which had been raised.

"Have you seen the rapids? Before they were submerged, I mean," a girl asked.

"Too much of them," the woman replied, her face clouding, "I hate the thought of them."

"Why?"

The woman made herself comfortable, folding her arms silently and thrusting her legs under the bench.

"I can see you're strangers to these parts," she began.

The girls nodded.

"I thought as much!... I grew up among these rocks like a shore-gull. I saw nothing but the rapids until I was thirty."

The woman fell into deep thought.

The sun had risen, and the Dnieper glittered like a meadow of broad-leaved grass. Olive-coloured shadows fell on the water from the steep, far away bank.

"You're educated, and all roads are open to you," the woman resumed in an even tone. "When I was your age I had never been far from our house. I was like a prisoner, and I was not an exception. We lived blindfolded.

"Our village lies between the Lomansky and Zaonetsky rapids. Looking left from the bank there'd be the plume of one rapid, looking the other way, upstream, you could see the plume of the other. One was a furious

torrent, and the other more so—they wouldn't let us out of their clutches, shut us off from the world. We had just one way out: to work for kulaks, or German colonists.

"My husband was a Dnieper man, too, and a river-pilot. He used to pilot rafts for other people through all the nine rapids.... It was terribly dangerous work! Some men couldn't stand it. When they'd come to the rapid they'd say farewell, make the sign of the cross and bind themselves with ropes. Then they'd go over—some of the logs would strike against the rocks and stand up endwise, like candles. The village women, all atremble, came to the bank to watch them, for there was no telling whether things would turn out all right, or whether the whirling waters would hurl their menfolk on to the bank with broken heads.

"That's how I lost my Sviridon. The backwater washed him ashore.... 'There,' it seemed to say, 'take your man, pilot's wife!' That was all.... My children had become orphans, and I—a widow.

"I dreaded the roar of the rapids after that. It tore at my soul.... They didn't always roar, you know, only when the weather was on the way, or before rain: they were a kind of barometer. They'd be silent in good weather, but when they began to growl, we'd know we were in for a storm or for rain the next day. I used to lose my head whenever I heard them. They tore at my heart-strings and brought visions of my husband....

"When my eldest boy grew up he wanted to be a pilot like his father.

"But I wouldn't have it. 'We've had one pilot in the family,' I said, 'you'd better work for Osaulenko, pouring grain into his barns. His door-steps* are pretty

* Door-steps—The Russian for both rapids and door-steps is *porogi.—Tr.*

high too.' Osaulenko was a kulak. He had a yard full of dogs and horses that were worse than anything. On Sundays when he galloped along the streets in his carriage he looked neither left nor right, never greeted anyone. Nobody would dilly-dally about getting out of his way—he had no scruples about running over one. He had all the best land in our parts. And if he found even a hen straying on it, he'd kill it without compunction. He never listened to complaints or paid heed to tears. 'Even the sky above me is mine,' he'd say.

"I sent my son into his service. The lad toiled for him right up to the beginning of collectivization. Only then did we heave a sigh of relief! Osaulenko's reign was over.

"My son got a job at Dnieprostroi. All the young people from our Dnieper villages went there at the time. 'I'm going away, mother!' he said. 'We'll bury the rapids and light things up with the electric sun.' I didn't object, although I had little faith in his grand plans. 'It's impossible to bury the rapids,' I thought, 'they've sprawled across the Dnieper from time immemorial.'"

And with a far away look in her eyes, she added with a smile: "How ignorant I was!"

"... Construction work went ahead. Whole villages were moved into the steppe, away from the river. But our village was on a height, so we stayed. One fine day—it was after the spring floods—the water suddenly began to rise! It was as though a second spring had come, and Osaulenko's meadow that skirted the village soon sank out of sight. We saw the rapids dwindling. The huge rock that we called Dragon, it stuck out of the Dnieper opposite my window—vanished.

"When we came out next morning there wasn't a trace of the rapids, or the Dragon, or the old riverbanks. This lake, Lake Lenin, stretched as far as the eye could see!

"The neighbours came to me with jokes and chatter. 'What a fine son you've got,' they laughed. 'He's flooded the rapids and brought the blue sea right to his mother's windows.'

"The collective farms got electric light. Pylons stretched across the steppe. My son's godmother had a transformer set up in her vegetable garden. At first she was scared to death that she would be struck by lightning. But she got used to it as time went on. How could she not get used to it when the thresher and the winnowing-machine, the sifter and the mill and workshop—worked on electricity. Ilyich's lamp* blazed forth in my cottage, too. No more soot spots on the ceiling from the rushlight—everything neat and tidy.

"My Vasilko came home on leave from the Dneprostroi. He had become a Party member by this time and was now a mechanic operating the turbines. He spent a couple of weeks with me, and then said: 'Come mother, I'll show you the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station—the electric heart of our Ukraine.' He took me over the plant: the dam, and the control panel, and the turbines down below, and I stood by twice at the sluicing. When I came home, I told our collective farmers that I had seen an electric kingdom. 'I've visited communism, most likely,' I said to them.

"We couldn't imagine life without the power station from then on. It had become a part of our collective farm, a part of ourselves. Whenever the light failed in the cottage, we worried ourselves sick thinking it was a break-down, and when it came on again we rejoiced that it was nothing serious.

"Then came the war. The menfolk left for the army,

* Ilyich's lamp—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was affectionately known as Ilyich. Electrification of huge hitherto unlighted areas in Russia was carried out according to Lenin's plan. Hence "Ilyich's lamp."—*Tr.*

while we helped dig anti-tank ditches along the Dnieper.

"The glow of fires rose over the river every night, and one evening the light in our cottages grew dim. Dimmer and dimmer, mournfully, silently, as though about to go out forever.

"It failed finally, and an agonizing sense of loss filled us: it had become dark and terrifying. My daughter Nadia opened the blacked-out windows, and sobbed violently. The fires across the Dnieper were visible from our window. The noise of battle reached us from the south, from the direction of the power station.

"The collective farmers came to the river-bank in the morning. We silently watched the slowly falling water. Suddenly the rapids appeared above it! The Dragon was covered with slime and decaying weeds. The rapids glowered at us in their slimy fury.

"They roared, and terror gripped us. Goose flesh crept over my body. I shouted: 'Our accursed past has come back with the rapids!'

"The level of the water fell. Nothing but swamps remained on the flooded Osaulenko estate and everywhere along the Dnieper. Fish was so plentiful that it could have been carted away in loads. But we had no time for it, so it rotted and its stench filled the village. We almost suffocated in it.

"We had to leave, moving eastward along beaten paths, cows bellowing because there was hardly time to milk them: enemy aeroplanes overhead like kites, bottlenecks at the river crossings, carts crowding each other, scuffles...

"To cut a long story short, we soon found ourselves on the far bank of the Volga. The Russian collective farmers welcomed us, Ukrainians, like brothers, made room for our cattle on their farms and gave us hay for our cows. We rolled up our sleeves and worked shoulder

to shoulder with them for victory. Put our hearts into the job and won the challenge banner of the Regional Committee of the Party and the Regional Executive Committee. Our farm supplied a neighbouring army hospital with milk and butter. How we looked after that farm, how we nursed it and coddled it!

"In 1943 when we returned to our Slobodka we heard in the distance the roar of the rapids. 'The devil take you!' I swore, looking at their stone fangs rising from the water.

"People came to us from the Dnieper Power Station. They had a letter for me and the others from Vasilko, my son. We held a meeting outside the village Soviet. There was plenty of excitement in Slobodka for the visitors told us the Party was calling on the people to help rebuild the power station!

"In the evening my Nadia came home flushed and excited from a Komsomol meeting. I knew right away what was in the air. 'Go, my dear,' I told her, 'go and help your brother. You have my blessings. Bury the cursed rapids again and give the people back their light.'

" 'We'll make it even brighter!' she replied happily. Next day she shouldered a spade and set out for the site with the other girls. Perhaps you've heard of her: Nadia Belozer, renowned concrete worker on the Dnieper Dam. They write about her in the papers. She's clever!

"Electricity is back with us again. We thresh the grain with it, pump the water and cut the silage. And when the load gets too heavy we know that the Zaporozhye Steel Works is having another smelting. We're on the same line. Eternal bonds link us with the Dnieper Dam and Zaporozhstal, we feel their heart-beat every minute.

"In the evenings when I come home and turn on the light, it warms my heart, just as if my own children had

come to the cottage and filled it with sunlight. And as I look on Lenin Lake, I feel as free as a bird: go wherever you wish, pilot's wife, no stone padlocks hold you captive any longer! The wild rapids are submerged forever!

"They are silent and we know that they'll never, never roar again!"

The woman stopped. The girls sat spell-bound, looking at the broad, sunlit water. Then they began to chatter:

"Oh, that means we're right over them!"

"Steaming at full speed!"

"Sailing in the new channel at high level!"

Beyond the railings the rays of the sun stabbed deep into the water.

"You're young and educated," the woman began again. "Look boldly into the future. Tackle and overcome all the rapids that rise in your path."

"Take our word for that!" the girls chorused.

Day had now come into its own and it was turning warm. As the woman unbuttoned her jacket, the Gold Star of a Hero of Socialist Labour sparkled on her breast.

"Why, you're ... you're a heroine!" one of the girls whispered admiringly.

"Yes.... Perhaps you'll be one some day...."

"I?!"

"Why not? Get to know your job and love the homeland, and you'll overcome every obstacle."

The deck was alive now. The steamer greeted a faraway landing with a long whistle.

"That's our Slobodka," the woman said. She got up and turned to her fellow-villagers: "Come along, pick up your bags, we're almost there!"

The girls crowded by the railing, entranced by the beauty of the scenery, their faces beaming.

The villages showed white along the Dnieper. Golden fields of wheat stretched away from either bank, receding into the steppe crossed from end to end with the masts of high-tension power lines.

The deep river, glittering in the sunlight, flowed on into the endless distance.

The banks retreated farther and farther, and the young teachers were struck with the novelty; it seemed as if an enormous gate was opening noiselessly, letting them into a new wide, wide world in which nothing was lacking, in which all dreams come true, all hopes become reality.

NEIGHBOURS

The members of the Chervony Lan Collective Farm still recall how their chairman, Anisim Artemovich, wept on the platform the year before. And as he wept, he shouted through his tears:

"I won't hand it over! Not until I've seen for myself and checked their indices!"

But the commission was on the spot, the achievements and indices were known to everybody, and the challenge banner had to go. It was presented to Petro Gasanchuk, an alert and imposing youth, officer of the reserve and new chairman of the Dniprelstan Collective Farm. The pride with which the victor carried the banner across the hall to the exit, marching at the head of his brigade and field-team leaders, was a sight to behold! And the look on Anisim Artemovich's face! He stood there, downcast, his shoulders hunched like a bear's.

He did not go to Dniprelstan, although it was not far away, the fields of both collective farms bordering each other. Yet Gasanchuk came to see him again, this time in his new carriage with its balloon tyres. He walked into the collective-farm office jaunty and gay with a little white bag in his hand and a row of medals jingling on his chest.

Anisim Artemovich pulled his cap over his eyes, and gruffly returned his greeting.

"I've brought a present for you," Gasanchuk said, putting the bag on the table. "As far as I know you don't

grow this variety, and we harvested a good crop on our floodlands. I thought I'd treat my neighbour to some for his porridge."

With a brisk jerk Gasanchuk loosened the bag.

Rice!

Anisim Artemovich fumed with rage.

The office workers took the white grains in their hands, tried them on their teeth and praised them shamelessly. Ever since rice porridge has been anathema to Anisim Artemovich. His wife complained about this to her neighbours some months later:

"I gave him honey-flavoured gruel this morning, but he wouldn't even look at it. Banged his spoon on the table, jumped up like a madman and rushed out.... And it was so white and tasty...."

In spring the collective farmers of the Chervony Lan planted their first rice in the floodlands. Anisim Artemovich, always aggressive when dealing with nature, decided to kill two birds with one stone: he let mirror carp loose in the paddy fields.

Gasanchuk, upon getting wind of this innovation, came rushing over to see for himself. Anisim Artemovich, who was on the plantation at the time, clambered out of the water, muddy up to the waist, and stationed himself on the dam with an independent air, flushed and content.

"Water it, girls!" he shouted to the women at the irrigation system. "Give it fresh Dnieper water—rice loves it. And let it have sunlight for dessert, plenty of sunlight!"

One might think that Anisim Artemovich controlled not only the collective-farm water-pump, but the sun as well.

Apparently the Dniprelstan chairman had come with the best of intentions. The fact that he had left his carriage far back among the willows and approached Anisim Artemovich on foot, was fairly good evidence, since he knew that his neighbour couldn't stand the sight of his sprightly gig.

"I've come to learn from you, Anisim Artemovich," Gasanchuk said after greeting him. "I want to try it too, it's a wonderful idea!"

"Don't idea me like that!" Artemovich interrupted. "Out with it. Let's hear what you've got to say!"

"Haven't you guessed? We're going to breed carp as well," Gasanchuk replied.

"Is that so? D'you hear that, girls?" Artemovich turned to them. "The bell has rung and the pupils are at their desks! You can begin the lesson. Teach them to grow gruel that's more than gruel—gruel and fish!"

"Who are they, these pupils?" the women asked spitefully, pretending not to recognize Gasanchuk.

"Neighbours," was Artemovich's lively reply, "from the Dniprelstan."

Turning his back on the visitor, Artemovich rolled a cigarette with his smudged, silt-caked fingers.

The visitor smiled patiently.

II

The rice, however, was by way of being an experiment with both collective farms, their first go. Tiny plantations of it nestled unpretentiously along the riverside, overshadowed by the vast expanses of wheat, whose golden tide rolled away to the horizon.

It was wheat that had brought about Anisim Artemovich's open rupture with Gasanchuk. It took place at two in the morning, after a visit to the machine and tractor station.

The collective-farm chairmen always missed Anisim Artemovich whenever their colleague failed to turn up at a conference. This was especially so with those who always sought a convenient target for leg-pulling and jokes. It was easier than falling off a log to make him lose his temper. All they had to do was to mention the greasy cap that he had worn for two years—on working days and on holidays and to all conferences and meetings. That business with the lorry—it was said that Artemovich had traded it for a carload of ordinary brooms—was a good second, and then there was the case of last year's apricots. Unfortunately, Anisim Artemovich couldn't deny this story—it happened to be authentic.

The secretary of the District Party Committee visited the field one day. He produced a bag of apricots and offered them to Anisim Artemovich and his brigade leaders.

"Have some," he said, "I got them from the girls when I was passing the orchards."

"What girls?" the brigade leaders asked.

"Why, the Dniprelstan girls," the secretary replied.

Upon hearing this, Anisim Artemovich suddenly sniffed: "D'you call these apricots? They're hard and sour, you can't keep a straight face when you eat them." The brigade leaders took their cue. "Not like ours," they said, "nothing can beat our apricots!"

"Oh, I've got some of yours," the secretary recollected, and turning to his driver, said: "Sashko, bring me the apricots we got from the Chervony Lan gardener."

"Excellent!" Anisim Artemovich exclaimed, smacking his lips as he tasted the apricots from the second bag. "You can see at a glance that this is cultivated fruit, not a wild-growing, sour apricot."

The brigade leaders also tasted the apricots from the second bag and unanimously lauded them to the heavens. The driver ran off behind the car, his sides burst-

ing with laughter. What was the matter? The secretary listened soberly to the flood of praise, nodding occasionally in approbation. Only when all the apricots had disappeared did he speak up:

"I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you, Anisim Artemovich. You've been eating Dniprelstan apricots just now. And the ones you've been abusing came from your own orchard. Sashko marked the bags so that there'd be no mistake.... See them?"

Whenever the collective-farm chairmen got together, they always led up to the apricots. "Call these apricots? Hard and sour, they'll have to be grafted to improve their quality." Gasanchuk was always the loudest in these discussions, naturally, for it was balm to his chafing wound.

But Anisim Artemovich had his revenge.

Returning from the machine and tractor station late one night he roused the whole family from their sleep. He couldn't wait to tell Romanovna, his wife, Grisha, his son, who drove the tractor, and his daughter Alenka, her brother's assistant, that he, Anisim Artemovich, had outwitted Gasanchuk over a combine. He boasted about it over his supper:

"I'll have a Stalinets combine! Let Gasanchuk scratch the soil with his first-edition Communar.... Let him try and finish the cutting in five days, as he promises! Oh, Gasanchuk, it'll take that Communar of yours a long time to chase the crickets out of your wheat!"

"He'll use some of the old harvesters," Grisha announced from his bed. "He's got a whole battery ready."

"Nobody asked you for your opinion!" Artemovich snapped. "Go to sleep!"

"You're being unfair, Dad!" his daughter giggled into her pillow. "First you wake us up, and then you want to muzzle us."

"You think you're very clever. Shut up, and listen to me. Of course I'm not as clever and as drilled as Gasanchuk, everyone can have his say with me. I don't demand army discipline and I haven't an office of my own. People come in to see me without even knocking.... If you had to work for him he'd make you toe the line!"

"Now he's off on his hobby-horse!" Alenka said, stretching herself. "Petro's ears will burn all night from the nice things you're saying about him."

"You see, she wastes pity on him," the offended Anisim Artemovich complained to his wife. "Maybe I should give him the Stalinets so that he can cut quicker and deliver the grain before anyone else in the district? So you want your father to be among the laggards? That's what I get after all these years! Criticized in my own home! Well, why don't you criticize me for not riding about in a carriage? Why don't you criticize me for going grey after fourteen years as chairman of the Chervony Lan? For not getting enough sleep, eating irregularly and making our farm a millionaire collective farm? I'm out of the running, of course, when it comes to Gasanchuk! Everything about him is better! Even the orders and medals he has aren't the same as mine."

"You're wrong there," his daughter remarked, "your medals are the same. He, too, has the Liberation of Warsaw medal."

But there was no stopping Anisim Artemovich.

"An officer, a Katyusha fighter, a Guardsman! And what about me? Just a sapper with two stripes! I simply built the bridges and made the ferries for him. He still wears his red-trimmed uniform and clean collars every day, and I'm so busy that I haven't the time to buy a new cap. Mine's greasy.... I don't deny it, it's prewar!... But if I were to throw it on our wheat it would

hang on the stalks and wouldn't fall. That wouldn't be the case if I tried it on Gasanchuk's wheat."

"How long is it since you've seen his wheat, father?" his son teased him.

"Don't worry about me: I see everything over there. I can tell you his yield right now."

"His winter wheat is every bit as good as ours," Alenka stated with conviction. "He expects an average of thirty centners."

"And he'll get it, too," Grisha put in.

Anisim Artemovich was silent for a minute. Then he rose from the table, hair tousled, face angry, glowering fiercely at his wife. She even stepped back to the stove.

"D'you know why his wheat is so good this year, Motria?" he growled, "it's because our shelter belt detained the snow on his fields. Is that clear? It acted as a windbreak for him!"

"Well, but the Dniprelstan trees protected our fields, didn't they?" his wife wanted to say, but thought better of it.

III

Wind. . . .

It had been blowing for days now. The fishermen on the Dnieper had green branches instead of sails: the branches were enough to send the boat nosing upstream through the waves. The harvesters, their work done, stood in the farm-yard, blades droning in the fury of the hot wind.

Dust rose on the highways, and billowed over the fields. The steppe birds were grey from it. The wind tore at the magnificent golden caps of the stacks, sending them rolling over the stubble.

Bending against the wind, Anisim Artemovich hurried to the threshing-floor. Evening was approaching.

The sun was setting without a glow, a sign that the morrow would be hot and dry. Sinking slowly, it disappeared into a thick red haze.

Tractors were busy half-way to the threshing-floor. They had plenty of elbow-room, and their powerful ploughs had free play! The Stalinets combine, made stationary by Anisim Artemovich's orders, was threshing day and night. Day by day ever larger areas were cleared of stacks—areas that were smooth and clean, ready for the ploughshares.

As he drew near Anisim Artemovich noticed that both tractors were idle.

"What's the matter? Holding a meeting or what?" he thought uneasily as he approached the drivers who had stopped their machines and gathered with their assistants on the hillock which was crowned with a wooden watch-tower. They were looking southward waving their arms in alarm and arguing hotly. Their voices were carried away by the wind. Alenka, very excited, stood in the centre, holding her red kerchief. Upon seeing his father, Grisha called to him impatiently.

Striding across the ploughed-up soil, Anisim Artemovich climbed to the top of the hillock.

A fire was burning away to the south.

The glow swung slowly along the darkened sky. It would creep along the ground and then rise in a blazing curve, ominously swelling in places into large fireballs. The tractor crews made numberless guesses, and most agreed that the fire was a long way off—in the Pyatiletka Collective Farm, or the Avanguard State Farm.

"Maybe they're burning stubble.... Their combines cut very high this year," one suggested.

"Maybe, but who'd burn stubble with a wind like this blowing?" another said.

"What are those flares we see all the time?"

"It's probably straw from the combines. They usually burn it on the spot."

"It's just like that fire on the other side of the Dnieper in forty-one, when the Novokamentsy people destroyed their grain. . . ."

"It seems to be burning out."

"No, there it goes again."

"D'you think it's straw?"

All of them hoped that it was far away and that only straw and stubble were alight. But their alarm increased, and anxiety gripped them. What if it was not just stubble? What if the wheat stacks had caught fire?

Looking into the distance with a frown on his face Anisim Artemovich grew angry.

"When did it start?" he asked.

"Who knows?. . . We just noticed it."

"Grisha," he shouted, "take off your shoes and shin up the watch-tower. Quick!"

Grisha threw off his dusty army boots, climbed on to the shoulders of his comrades and clambered up like a cat. The others waited with bated breath, heads thrown back and looking at him intently.

"Well?"

Grisha reported: "I think it's in Dniprelstan."

"At Petro's?" Alenka exclaimed, gazing at her father with terror.

Ignoring Alenka, he shouted ferociously to Grisha:

"Take a good look! Where exactly is the fire?"

"On the other side of Salt Gully. . . . But I can't make out the exact place, whether it's near the combine, or more to the left, in No. 2 brigade. . . . It's in the second brigade, I'd say!"

Anisim Artemovich swayed, as if something had hit him.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he roared at the tractor-drivers, at his daughter, at all who stood near

him. "Didn't you hear? The wheat is still stacked in their second brigade!"

The tractor-drivers looked as guilty as if they had been the cause of the fire. Grisha, who had descended from the watch-tower, was breathing heavily, holding the heavy boots in his hands.

"Father. . . ."

"Shush!. . . Get on your tractors!" Artemovich shouted at the top of his voice, clenching his fists. "Start the engines and get going!"

A few minutes later the two tractors and their ploughs were rumbling across the field, taking the shortest way to the ominous fire.

Grisha drove the leading tractor. The steering-wheel jerked in his hands like an over-heated machine-gun. Alenka and her father were perched behind him. They were being thrown about and shaken mercilessly: the tractor was travelling at top speed. But it was too slow for Anisim Artemovich. Holding on to his cap he shouted into his son's ear, "Faster, faster! Step on it!"

The ploughs bounced and rumbled behind them in clouds of dark dust.

IV

At this moment Anisim Artemovich never gave a thought to Gasanchuk. Ever since he had climbed the hillock and seen the far-away fire in the dusk everything seemed to have acquired new meaning and new value.

The confounded neighbours who always strove to overtake him, receded into the background. He forgot all about the unbearable Gasanchuk with his carriage and his sarcastic rejoinders. There was only this terrible danger, this menace to the property of the people.

The moment Grisha shouted from the tower that the fire was in Dniprelstan and that it was possibly grain burning, Anisim Artemovich felt fear creep over him.

The forest shelter belts seemed to step aside, the collective-farm boundaries vanished. Not only the land of his own artel, which ended this side of the shelter belt, but the fields of the Dniprelstan, and Pyatiletka, and Avanguard collective farms had become near and dear to him. The menace advancing on the neighbouring fields seemed to bind them and hand them into his care. He was going to defend the soil. He had become champion and master of the entire steppe, from end to end.

As the tractors tore through the trees of the shelter belt and emerged on the Dniprelstan fields, he saw everything. Fanned by the wind, the fire advanced from the neighbouring hill-side in a curving, elongated tongue. Where it had passed lay consummate darkness, a black desert, dotted here and there with smouldering islets.

People were fighting the fire by hand. He saw them against the flames, lined up in a long row, under a shower of star-like sparks. They had spades, pitchforks, rakes, empty sacks and odd pieces of canvas. The wind, meanwhile, fanned the flames; fire-snakes crept in among the people, straining ahead, closing in quickly, licking insolently at the stubble, which seemed to be rushing eagerly to its doom. A whole field of stubble was burning now, but the wheat-stacks were near by—hundreds of them, heavy, defenceless, illuminated by the flames and embraced by currents of sweltering air.

The flames swept towards the stacks with incredible speed. The fire rushed forward in huge billows, forming more and more danger points. The spur of the ravine was enveloped in flames, and the stacks were right alongside it, on the left. The Dniprelstan lorries, which had brought the people from the threshing-floors, were in immediate danger, and the drivers were taking them out of the danger zone.

A piercing scream rent the air. It came from a tousled, bare-footed girl who jumped out from behind a half-stack with a burning sheaf in her hands.

The grain had caught fire!

At this moment Anisim Artemovich tore down the slope of the hollow with his two tractors, the ploughs biting deep into the soil.

The tractors rumbled on side by side, one ahead of the other, across the path of the fire. They left a wide trail of freshly-ploughed soil.

Standing in the leading tractor, Anisim Artemovich instructed his son where to lay the furrow....

The boiling water in the radiators sent the radiator cap flying and a fountain rose perpendicularly into the air.

"Never mind," Anisim Artemovich spluttered. "Keep going!"

The tractor-drivers, goggles glittering on their caps, drove their machines alongside the half-stacks. A dependable zig-zag barrier of freshly-ploughed earth appeared under the very nose of the fire, blocking its advance. Occasionally they had to drive around a flaming half-stack, and the smell of burning grain infuriated Anisim Artemovich. He grabbed his son's shoulders, ready to shake the soul out of him:

"Quicker! Quicker!" he shouted.

It never entered Anisim Artemovich's head that this was a Dniprelstan field, Gasanchuk's! He only recalled this when he saw the headlights of Dniprelstan tractors coming from the opposite direction. Covered with soot, black and tousled, Gasanchuk was shouting to him, his teeth gleaming white like rice-grains. He was thanking Anisim Artemovich, it seemed. Thanks were due, no doubt about that! A wide belt of freshly-ploughed furrows encircled the Dniprelstan harvest, blocking the flames. Only three or four half-stacks had been lost.

After passing Gasanchuk, Anisim Artemovich bethought himself suddenly.

"That's enough! We didn't come to do his ploughing for him! We've enough of our own to do. Home, boys!"

The wind had dropped perceptibly.

The fire, impotent against the earthen barrier, was rapidly dying out. The people stamped on it in triumph, shook themselves, patted each other's smouldering clothes.

Coming abreast of Gasanchuk for a second time, Anisim Artemovich, with the voice of a procurator, inquired as to the cause of the fire.

"The shepherds were burning weeds on the roadside, I'm told," Gasanchuk explained meekly, "and because of the strong wind couldn't keep the fire under control. . . ."

"Nothing ever goes right with you!" Anisim Artemovich remarked reprovingly, looking back, "and why is your lorry jigging about on three wheels?"

"Yours would too, Anisim Artemovich, if you had to take a hundred people to a fire!" The Dniprelstan driver snapped back, slowly turning the lorry with a burst back tyre.

"Don't try to fool me!" Anisim Artemovich shouted as if the driver were his own subordinate, and added to Gasanchuk, "Haven't you any spare tyres?"

"No."

"And that's what you call running a farm? How are you going to transport your grain?"

Gasanchuk frowned, while Artemovich droned on with displeasure: "All you do is stretch your hand out to your neighbours. . . . Never mind, send someone along tomorrow, and I'll let you have a spare. D'you hear me?"

"Yes."

"But only for three days, not a minute longer, so you can do your duty and deliver the grain to the state," Anisim Artemovich concluded menacingly. Then he

turned his back on Gasanchuk, and ordered his tractor-drivers to start for home.

Alenka, standing behind her father in the flare of the headlights, smiled tenderly at Gasanchuk.

At peace with himself, Anisim Artemovich surveyed with placid satisfaction the Dniprelstan stacks in the bluish dusk of the star-studded sky.

Countless, like the head-pieces worn by the knights of old, they stretched away to the horizon.

BEACON

When the aeroplane comes to sprinkle our plantation I have to stand like a beacon so that the pilot leaves no corner unsprinkled. It serves the greedy weevil right! Come to our plantation the day after tomorrow and look under any clot of earth, you'll find the weevil dead as a door-nail. The poison will have done its work.

The plane has turned, and is flying right at me. Touch wood, the pilot is a sharp and cheery fellow.

"Stefania," he said to me, "you're my faithful landmark, I can see you even through the clouds!"

I pretended that I wasn't interested in his joke, because my husband had a jealous look in his eye.

It's amazing how strong and swift the pilot is: he was overhead a second ago, and now he's flying over the village roofs, a white tail floating behind him. I suppose he has gone for more poison.

You might want to know where my land ends. But really it has no end at all. Wherever I turn these days—as far as the eye can see—it's all mine, making me glad and interested in everything.

I am now rich. Ever since we formed our collective farm I have become mistress of the soil. Don't think that my hands are too frail—they're good for any kind of work, and they're not afraid of fatigue and difficulties.

I had to work for other people when I was still a child,—look after their children, and weed their fields.

I didn't see very much of the old regime, but I had my fill of misery and grief. As the song goes: wherever she sowed she watered the land with her tears.... I had to toil in the fields all the livelong day, and all for someone else. "Shall I ever see the day when I'll work for myself?" I thought in despair.

Then I married Yukhim and had someone, at last, to share my sorrows. Our plot lay right at our door-step. It was hardly big enough to stand on, too small for a single bean-stalk. As I remember now, we wanted to buy a horse so that my Yukhim could become a drayman. We scrimped and scrimped all the summer and then we went to the fair. But the kind of horse that we could buy with our mite wasn't up to much.

A Gypsy followed us about, badgering us to buy a sorry-looking nag.

"Buy it, buy it!" he persisted.

"But it limps...."

"That's nothing," he retorted, "you don't want it to dance the gopak, do you?"

"But it's blind."

"What does that matter. It won't have to read the newspaper for you, will it? Take it, you'll be somebody then!"

We haggled and scrutinized the nag from muzzle to tail, weighing the bargain over and over, and finally we bought it. Our ambition to be somebody got the better of us!

We had barely reached the road with it when the beast suddenly dropped and gave up the ghost.

Dared my Yukhim dream at that black moment that he'd ever have a stable two hundred metres by eight, full of horses, and all of them his? Dared he hope to see his Stefania mistress of the land about her, with an aeroplane at her beck and call?

Yet that's how things are!

In my letters to my sister Emilia in Canada I always tell her that the sun has risen in our country. My husband can eat what he likes and the children are getting an education. I have a medal for raising excellent sugar-beet. In the past only a duchess could have the respect that I command.

Our people are happy. Twenty of our Slavuchino boys and girls are attending college. When mine are old enough they'll go too. All roads are open to us nowadays.

There was a time when the landlords regarded the ordinary peasant woman as being subhuman, took us for ignorant working jades. But what am I now?!

I attended the May-Day celebrations in the capital last year at the invitation of our government.

My Yukhim sulked as I was packing for the journey. He was afraid that I would leave him now that I had won renown.

"Don't worry," I told him, "I'll be back soon."

How could I have refused the invitation? In any case, once my mind is made up there's no budging me.

"Yukhim mustn't sulk," I thought. "His day will come. His horses will bring him renown and distinction. I'm sure of that."

We reached Kiev at two o'clock and photographers snapped us as soon as we stepped on to the platform. Buses whisked us to the hotel and we rested from our journey.

A woman reporter came to my room and wanted to know how I had achieved my success.

After dinner we visited a museum and were enchanted with what we saw there, gazing in amazement at the pictures. The walls were covered with them, and the girl who showed us round had something to say about each. She spoke for two hours without a break.

The next day we watched the parade, arriving on the square in good time. A militiaman politely showed us to our places. "There you are, on the grandstand," he said.

It was a lovely parade. First came a boys' band, then the soldiers. There seemed no end to them: brave and stately, with white gloves on their hands. The banners and the music turned my head and a feeling of joy ran through me for all this might of ours!

After the soldiers came the city folk, a sea of people flowing and flowing through the square. Column after column, girls with garlands on their heads, women in silk, men in their Sunday best. There were songs in the air and flowers blazing wherever I turned. I saw radiant faces, eyes sparkling like stars, and it was obvious enough that these people knew the meaning of happiness and plenty. The hills along the Kreshchatik* swarmed with holiday crowds, and a blimp soared in the azure sky, a red flag trailing behind it with the images of Lenin and Stalin.

In the evening we went out into the streets to see ... what do you call them ... oh, yes, the salutes. We were up on Vladimirsky Hill and saw everything. There came a roar of gun-fire and the evening sky blazed up, blossoming like a flower-bed embroidered with a rainbow of bright-coloured threads, converging into little balls and bows.

"Reach for them, girls!" I shouted in glee to our villagers. "We'll want them for our New Year's tree!"

We were invited to a government dinner. The huge reception hall was full of armchairs and the polished floor gleamed like cut-glass. I hope we'll have a floor like that in our club.

The tables were laden with good things—food, champagne, beer and lemonade. Forty tables in all!

* *Kreshchatik*—the main street in Kiev.—*Tr.*

Someone had placed cards on the tables with our names so that we would have no difficulty in finding our places.

We took our places and thought how wonderful life had become: an ordinary collective-farm woman on an equal footing with a minister! Medals and orders given to her for her work, tables filled with good things laid for her at a government reception!

I wasn't hungry, but the mere sight of the table did me good.

I recalled my sister Emilia and it made my heart bleed. What could she expect over there? She had written to me about it:

"... It's a hard life, sister. You are the only people who brighten it up for us in this fog, like an inextinguishable beacon."

The crystal chandelier sparkled with myriads of lights, our peaceful conversation flowed on and on, the china and cut-glass tinkled melodiously. When the glasses were filled, Comrade Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeyevich, raised his and toasted us.

We drained our glasses and felt quite at ease. Our girls exchanged jokes with the generals sitting among us.

Coffee was served. Nikita Sergeyevich asked me across the table how much sugar I took.

"Plenty," I said, "thank you kindly, Nikita Sergeyevich."

"You're the one we've got to thank, Comrade Shevchuk," he replied, "the sugar is made from your beets."

Then he asked me what yield I expected for the season.

"I've signed a socialist pledge for four hundred centners," I said, "but I hope to add a bit to that. I want us to have a sugared life."

"And sugared it will be," Nikita Sergeyevich smiled, "it's all in our hands."

Music struck up after the dinner and dancing started. I danced the gopak with a general who had two rows of medals on his chest.

Cares awaited us when we returned home. The sugar-beet had been sown but there was no rain.

I telephoned the agronomist at the district centre: "Let's have rain," I demanded. He came to the farm and found me in the fields.

The soil was parched and my beets hadn't sprouted. I sank on to a mound and wept.

"Is there any hope?" I asked the agronomist.

He looked up at the clouds, sniffed the air, and announced:

"There'll be rain tomorrow."

You may not believe it, but it actually rained the next day!

Our beets sprouted gaily. I tended the shoots like babies. If the roots could only speak, they'd tell you about it. My knees were sore attending to their needs. I even had to make linen knee-pads. And when the autumn came I gathered four hundred and thirty centners to the hectare!

Now I want to better this achievement. I have another year's experience to back me and the spring this year is promising. As the people hereabouts say, "dry in April, rain in May and the harvest will be as rich as the Danube!"

Well, there comes the pilot again with another load. He is as swift as a hawk, and as he looks down at me I wave to him with my kerchief.

SUMMER LIGHTNING

Vutanka had spent the night on the shore with her fishing team, and knew nothing of what had happened at home. In the morning when she ran off to do her household chares she saw the dark stains.

Someone had smeared her wall with tar.*

Vutanka examined the smears calmly, turned up her sleeves and began to scrape them off with a knife.

The neighbours came and loudly expressed their regret.

"Who could have done it, Vutanka?" they asked.

"Never mind," Vutanka replied. "It only shows that my cheeks haven't faded and that some silly soul is pining for me."

She hummed a gay tune as she scraped the wall.

At this moment her comrades of the fishing team were gathered around the fire on the shore, making short work of their fish-soup. They kept a goodly portion for Vutanka.

The unusual event, news of which had already reached the fishermen, was the topic of conversation.

The wrong done to Vutanka upset the fishermen. It was a long time since anything of the kind had been seen in the village. It was believed that this gross, old-

* Tarring a gate or wall was an obscene pre-revolutionary custom, intended to bring disgrace to the girl living in the tarred house.—*Tr.*

fangled custom had passed into oblivion. Yet here it was again. As if pre-revolutionary hooligans had risen from their graves and walked the streets of their Chervona Ukraina maritime artel in the dead of the night, playing their dirty tricks.

Feeling ran all the higher among the fishermen, since they knew that Vutanka had not given any cause for the insult. That she spent the summer nights on the shore in their fishing shacks could hardly be a reason.

"Who could have done it?" the puzzled team leader kept asking. "Whom do you suspect?"

The older men discussed every reckless youngster in the village, and came to the conclusion that none of them could have done this filthy trick.

The young people did not do things like this these days. All of them had been to secondary school, or they had been at courses in the city. And most of them were Komsomol members. It was simply out of the question that any of them had used the tar-brush.

And yet it had been done by somebody.

"All of us share in this disgrace," the team leader said with decision. "A survival of the dead past has raised its head in our midst, a hangover from tsarist times has crawled out of its hiding-place and slapped itself right on the wall of our best member!"

"Not just the wall," someone corrected him, "its shadow falls on the whole team. . . ."

"That's right," said another.

The aroma of the tasty fish-soup soon brought all the regular habitués to the fire. The old watchman shuffled up, spoon in hand, and was followed by Konon Makarovich Shtepa, the artel chairman.

Konon Makarovich was visibly upset.

"This will spread like wildfire," he groaned, seating himself by the soup-kettle. "It will be on everybody's

lips all along the shore. 'Fine goings-on,—criticizing people with tar,' they'll say."

"We haven't the faintest idea of the culprit," the team leader pleaded apologetically.

"There's no denying that Vutanka is a gay girl and likes dancing, but that doesn't mean that she's been tasting the forbidden fruit," Konon Makarovich spluttered between mouthfuls of soup. "She'd send you tumbling head over heels if you tried getting fresh with her."

"Is that a confession?" Andrei Mokh, a stocky pock-marked fisherman, grinned. "Had a taste yourself, Konon Makarovich?"

"Stop smirking, Andrei," the chairman rapped out angrily. "This is the wrong time. Vutanka will want us to investigate. I simply can't understand it: while she was here, hauling the net with the best of them, some dirty bully defiled her home. What were we doing at the time? Old Garasko, you seem to have a wonderful time smirking about it, but tell me where were your eyes, you, the so-called night-watchman, the collective-farm sentinel?"

"I'm not a nursemaid for the girls," old Garasko retorted calmly. "Collective-farm property is my worry."

"Maybe you're the guilty person, grandfather?" Andrei Mokh addressed him jokingly. "Maybe you took it out on her for not letting you have your own way?"

"My tarring days are over, lads. Believe me this was done by someone who can't sleep at night thinking about her eyes."

"Old, but observant!" Konon Makarovich remarked. "With a flair for a pretty eye."

"You need have no doubts about that," Garasko came back.

They smoked their pipes after the soup, and again posed the puzzling question. Maybe one of the tractor-

drivers had done it? But no, all of them were educated and had medals for their work. Moreover, all of them were married men....

Vutanka had gone with the girls to the frontier-post the other day to see a film. Perhaps she had made a hit with one of the soldiers, and some jealous wooer had had his revenge?

Konon Makarovich firmly rejected this.

The frontier-guards—impossible, he said, they are cultured and disciplined. It would never have entered into their heads.

"The Turks did it!" Grandfather Garasko said with a straight face, looking suggestively at the sea, and yawning sweetly.

"They would if they could," someone put in. "But they don't dare show their noses in our waters."

The fishermen dispersed without coming to any conclusion. Grandfather Garasko rinsed his spoon in the sea and trotted off home; Konon Makarovich made for the fields to see the cotton-growers, the others went to their shacks.

Only Latiuk, the youngest member of the team, remained at the dying fire. He had not taken part in the conversation, had smoked cigarette after cigarette and stared gloomily at the sea.

Ivan Latiuk came to the coast with a group of migrants from the western regions and had joined the fishing team a few weeks earlier. Although he had had no knowledge of the work, his common sense and diligence soon won him the sympathy of the older men. The team leader even praised him at a meeting, promising him a fine future.

Latiuk developed a liking for Vutanka Guslistaya from the first. Vutanka was gay, pretty and smart; slim of figure, she was as firm as though walking on springs.

Her burning glances made him feel hot under the collar. Besides, she knew everything that Ivan did not: how to repair the nets and steer the launch, and she knew the names of all the fish in the sea. Nor did she mind sharing her skill with him.

"Which way is the wind blowing today, Ivan?" she would ask, and if he could not answer correctly, she would laugh and tell him.

Day by day Ivan grew fonder of her. He saw Vutanka on holidays among the young people at the club and had eyes only for her. The other girls seemed to be shrouded in a fog.

She had once said jokingly:

"We'll marry you off to the best cotton-grower, a labour heroine. Don't let her fame scare you, you're no laggard yourself."

"Me?" the lad blushed.

Vutanka continued: "You'll learn and when the season comes you'll go to sea. You'll get what you're after, don't worry. People who work conscientiously are always sure of our love and respect."

Ivan worked well. He had corns the size of nuts on his hands. He knew that people liked him for that, and they went out of their way to help him. So far everything had been fine: the work was agreeable and his comrades were a pleasant lot.

But Vutanka? Vutanka was a problem he could not solve! She was like a golden sun-ray, fresh as though she had just stepped out of the sea, and every time Ivan saw her he was dazzled and bewitched. He had thoughts of marrying her. He dreamed of the time she would take his head and press it to her rounded breast.

Not long ago while helping Vutanka put up the sail her bare arm accidentally had touched his hand, and it seemed to him that he was enveloped in flames and almost lost his head.

"Vutanka!" he shouted.

She even stepped back.

"Could you love me, Vutanka?" he asked.

"That goes without saying!" she replied, a merry laugh ringing in his ears.

It was evident that she was making fun of the matter, but for him it was no joke.

The day before it had been his turn to deliver the fish to the storehouse. It was dusk by the time he returned to the shore. On the way back he made up his mind to have it out with Vutanka once and for all. He would call her to the launch, or find a way of getting into her shack and wringing an answer from her.

But when he reached the shore Vutanka was not there: she had gone to the frontier-post with the other girls to see a film.

At first Ivan intended following her there, but the chaps said that the show had started long ago, and would soon be finished.

What a pity he had taken their advice! It had been a really miserable evening!

All his thoughts were on Vutanka. Nothing could take his mind off her. He would gaze at the sea and she would come walking out of it, mocking him from among the waves, and as he turned his eyes away she'd be laughing at him from the fields!

It had been a warm evening, rich with the aroma of the steppe, the kind of evening that lured all sweethearts, that is, all the happy ones, to its abundant bosom. The stars twinkled as they always do before rain and the waves murmured their everlasting lullaby. An occasional sheet of white and crisp summer lightning lit up the distant horizon, which loomed like an enormous black bowl, but there was no thunder.

Ivan lay sprawled on the sand near the shack, hands under his head, listening to the drone of the electric

motor at the frontier-post. The fishermen sang softly around the fire, and the song, to be sure, was about him, Ivan Latiuk! "And the widow gathered flax. . . ." Flax in the field, or fish in the sea—wasn't that one and the same thing? "Picked and gathered," sang a song,"—she sang as she worked, true enough. And then it said: "Why don't you drink, why aren't you merry?"

Hah! But how can he drink, how be merry!

The song ended. The drone of the motor stopped. Only the tractors far away in the steppe maintained a ceaseless rumble.

Ivan was delirious with excitement. The team leader had called to him in passing, but Ivan feigned sleep and made no reply.

He was all ears: she would pass by in the darkness, perhaps, stepping softly.

Sharp at eleven the passenger steamer had blown her whistle, cutting the waves with her white bow. She was an impressive sight with garlands of bright lights. The radio sounded on the steamer, couples stood by the railing. Then she vanished into the darkness and the horizon became darker and gloomier.

The motor at the frontier-post had long been silent, but no Vutanka. Only the sea lapped lazily at Ivan's feet, and the mute summer lightning blinked derisively at him from afar.

His feverish imagination conjured up Vutanka in another's arms, thrilling in someone's embrace, gazing at the distant summer lightning. Then, in his mind's eye he pictured her telling this someone about him, Ivan Latiuk, mocking his lumbering and awkward love.

Ivan could no longer hold himself in check. He got up impetuously and looked about: his comrades were sleeping, the fire smouldering.

He didn't know what to do with himself, and stumbled blindly along the shore, coming to the launch where he

intended having it out with Vutanka that evening. He spotted the pail of tar and it reminded him of how the lads in his native village used to have their revenge on unfaithful sweethearts. And there in the dark by the launch, this evil thought had ensnared him.

The deed had been done and nothing could undo it now. Never in his life had he suffered so!

It had all been so futile! The tarring had not made the impression that it did in tsarist times. The collective farmers hadn't the slightest intention of baiting Vutanka. They were searching for the culprit. And what was more, he himself didn't want them to bait Vutanka! Not at all! He'd be the first to stand up for her.

But Vutanka had no lack of champions. Besides everybody knew that her husband had been killed at the front, that she could protect her honour if the need arose, and, last but not least, she was a splendid worker and never complained. The tar had not stuck to her, and Ivan felt that at any moment it would appear on his forehead.

He was in agony. Why had he come upon that damned pail of tar?

The discussion over the fish-soup that morning had been torture. It seemed to Ivan that the fishermen and Konon Makarovich, and even old Garasko, knew the identity of the culprit, that they were only pretending that he was beyond suspicion. It seemed to him they had only made a show of debating first one and then the other, first the tractor-drivers and then the frontier-guards.

But no one fitted in with their suspicions, and Ivan had no doubt that they were right in their judgement. "Perhaps the Turks had done it?" old Garasko had said. That meant that Ivan was a Turk! Beware, comrades, a Turk is sipping soup with you, while you pamper and pity him.

And maybe they really believed that he was a cultured, decent fellow, like the others?

His head reeled from these thoughts.

"I was blind at the time, comrades," he felt like shouting, "blind as a bat! The lightning blinded me!"

Vutanka turned up at the shore two days later. She behaved as if nothing had happened.

"I've scraped it off and I'll whitewash the wall tomorrow," she told the fishermen.

"We've done our best to find the scoundrel," the team leader began, shrugging his shoulders, "but failed. It's a strange business. . . ."

"Doubly strange to me," Vutanka said.

"Do you suspect anyone?" the team leader asked.

Vutanka replied, "No," and it seemed to Ivan that she cast a meaningful glance in his direction. The lad blushed and he had a feeling that tar was coming out in heavy black stains on his forehead.

He was taciturn and depressed. In the evening they had to drag the sweep-nets, but all that they caught was half a ton of "hearts," as the fishermen called the huge jellyfish. The other team fared no better. The schools were not expected for a day or two.

When darkness fell Ivan stole away from the shore. Vutanka was the first to notice his absence, and felt sorry that she had. After all, what was he to her? True, she liked seeing his broad-shouldered figure by the fire in the evenings, liked listening to his pleasant baritone, and the night before she found herself searching for him with her eyes at the frontier-post, hoping that he had come too.

She wondered where he spent his evenings, to whom he sang his serenades. It wouldn't have made any difference to her a little while ago, but now. . . .

A few minutes later Vutanka set out along the path leading from the shore to the village. Rain was near and she had to take in her washing. The wind was blowing up, the sky overcast. Angry flashes cut the sky where the summer lightning had glimmered the night before. The thunder growled ominously.

Vutanka turned from the path as she neared the village, taking the short cut across the allotments. She came to her yard and froze to the spot.

Someone was standing by her cottage. Maybe the culprit had returned to smear the walls again.

Yes, he was at it again, the devil, she could see him plainly now, stooping to dip his brush, and then smearing with broad sweeps.

She drew nearer and could not believe her eyes: it was Ivan. He had a brush, and a pail ... with whitewash.

He was whitewashing her cottage!

Vutanka watched him with drawn breath, tingling with excitement.

This lasted a minute or two. Then lightning cut the sky, and he turned round. A sudden blinding flash lit up the clouds.

SUNFLOWERS

While waiting for them to find the collective-farm chairman, the sculptor relaxed in the office-porch and sipped mineral water. It was very hot. The young trees drooped wearily, as if seeking relief in their own shadows. The spacious yard, sandy and hot, was as deserted and as desolate as a stray bit of desert. It was the hour of the mid-day interval, and everything living sought the shelter of the shade. Apart from the busy bees droning tirelessly among the flowers the only sound came from the sporadic click of the abacus in the office. It was a pleasant change after the bustle of the city and the tiring journey. The sculptor took off his necktie and unbuttoned his shirt.

A group of half-naked sun-tanned boys suddenly broke the silence. They appeared from somewhere behind the wall and stopped in their tracks at the sight of the strange elderly man in the white suit. They were now debating who he could be, and guesses came thick and fast.

"A lecturer, or maybe another scientist?" said one.

"It's someone interested in our green conveyor," said another.

"Or in the merino sheep . . ." put in a third.

"Look at his bald head! Almost smooth enough to skate on!"

The sculptor grinned good-naturedly. Already, in his mind's eye, he was moulding their slim figures in clay

and then bronze and placing them in the arbours of the city park.

The chairman, an affable, rosy-faced individual with sparkling, restive eyes, made his appearance. He had been told that the sculptor had arrived to make a likeness of Melania Chobitko, the distinguished collective farmer.

"We'll have things humming in a minute," he said. "I've already seen to it: Melania will be here in a jiffy." Looking amiably at his visitor, the chairman invited him to his office.

The big, sunny room was spotless, and adorned with red banners.

"It's like a minister's cabinet," the sculptor remarked.

The chairman took the compliment for granted. He said: "I had a visit from a Polish delegation the other day and the extra chairs are still here." Indicating a seat opposite his own, he added, "Sit down, please."

The two men studied each other silently for a moment, the chairman immobile at his desk like a hawk, erect and cheery. His sunburnt hands and the black sleeves of his jacket seemed out of place alongside the carved writing-set on the polished glass of the desk, yet the sculptor perceived a certain harmony and charm in the scene. Those toil-hardened hands deserved to be sculptured.

"What can you tell me about your heroine," the sculptor asked, crossing his legs. "I know nothing about her beyond what I've read in the papers."

"They had articles about her in the magazines," the chairman said.

"I've read those too, and I have clippings of her photos, but all of them profiles, none full face."

"Well, what is it you want to know?" the chairman hemmed, unable to decide what this bald-headed man with the starchy face was after. "She's worth her weight

in gold: modest, hard-working, patriotic. Everybody has the greatest respect for her. Her father was killed at the front, she attended the seven-year school, got her Gold Star Hero of Labour award for growing maize. She is now growing sunflowers as well."

"Yes, that's excellent, but it doesn't give me enough. I want to know something more. Do you get me, Comrade Chairman?... How shall I put it? You see, I don't want the things you find in a questionnaire. What interests me, is her soul, her character."

The chairman took a deep breath. How was he to know what these people want? One asks for her questionnaire, another wants her soul, and what the next will want heaven alone knows.

"You'll see her character for yourself," he said, "she's gentle and kind. As for her soul," he grinned, looking at the ceiling, "I don't know, whether or not she'll reveal it to you."

"What makes you think she won't?"

"Well, the soul, you know, is a delicate matter, it needs a special kind of key to open it. May I ask why you're so keen on her soul? As I see it, you are making a bust of her, and all you need is the model, the physiognomy, so to say."

"Oh, no! Not only that!" the sculptor retorted heatedly, and the chairman sensed at once that he had struck the wrong note. "Exteriors, of course, are very important," the sculptor was saying, "but the true sources of beauty...."

A knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in," shouted the chairman. It was clear that he knew who it was.

A thick-set girl wearing a black woollen jacket entered the office. She had a snow-white kerchief on her head, and the Gold Star glittered on her lapel. The sculptor guessed rather than recognized Melania Chobitko.

"You sent for me, Ivan Fedorovich," she said to the chairman.

"Yes. Let me introduce you. This comrade has come to make a sculpture of you."

The sculptor turned on the girl the sharp glance of the professional. He knew at once why the newspapers gave only profiles of her. Melania was far from pretty and the photographers probably had had a hard time making her look better than she did in real life. Well, it was the job of photographers to do that kind of thing, but what about sculptors?

The chairman seated Melania on his right, under the banners and the sheaves of seasoned rice stalks. He looked at her encouragingly, almost admiringly, as if she were a rare beauty. Who knows, perhaps he really saw one in her. But she herself, seemingly, was conscious of her failings and appeared very embarrassed under the scrutiny of the sculptor. It was torture sitting in front of him. She was conscious of her shoulders, and did not know what to do with her legs and arms.

"Well, Melania," the chairman explained once more, "our friend, the sculptor, wants to make a bust of you for the exhibition."

"What will you think up next!" she exclaimed, blushing in confusion. "Can't you find a better model?"

The sculptor scrutinized her with the inexorable eyes of the master craftsman. He had the impression that Melania was doing her best to upset his plans. She held herself stiffly, and in his eyes her ungainliness, far from diminishing, increased as time went on. He appreciated that it would not be easy for the girl to sit for him; knowing beforehand what it was he wanted, and she anxious to help him in every way and not knowing how. He hoped that Melania would regain her composure and be free and natural in her movements. Vain hope! She was on pins and needles, grinning in a forced way at

Ivan Fedorovich and pressing the corner of her kerchief to her lips. He was amused by this at first, but then it became irritating. This ungainly girl apparently always behaved like that, and these mannerisms had become second nature. Nothing could change her now. And why had she put on all this finery? Oh, Melania, Melania, making a bust of you would be no easy matter!

The conversation made no headway. Melania would not say a single word without first glancing at the chairman, asking him with her eyes if she was saying the right thing. The sculptor pitied her: strong, young, all dressed up—and absolutely helpless. Give her but half a chance and she'd leave everything to the chairman—the talking and smiling, and the posing.

Surely she is not like this all the time, he thought nervously. "Isn't there ever a ... how would you say it... a spark of life in her?"

"Tell me," he asked, trying a new approach, "have you any relatives or friends?"

Melania blushed.

"Yes, I have relatives," she murmured after a pause, and friends.... What exactly do you mean by friends?"

"She is not married," the chairman snapped, giving the sculptor a hostile look.

The sculptor sensed his blunder, the tactlessness of his question, and realized that he should not have put it to her. But how was he to know?

Every approach had failed. It was useless trying to glimpse her character through that chaos of ungainly lines and awkward movement!

"I can't do much here!" the sculptor said to himself finally. "This is no place for me, and I must get out before it is too late. But how to do so without offending her? After all, it isn't her fault. Just as it isn't mine."

The chairman broke the silence cheerfully: "Well, Malasha, here's your chance. In olden times they made sculptures only of goddesses, but now our turn has come. Progressing, aren't we?"

"You should have chosen Gania," Melania interrupted him.

"All in good time," the chairman put in, "don't be so self-effacing. Get yourself sculptured. But there's another problem: where shall we put him up?"

"I shan't stay long," the sculptor cut in. "I think I'll leave tomorrow."

"What!" the chairman ejaculated. "D'you expect to finish the job overnight?"

"No, no, I shall do it at home, in my workshop. I'll make a couple of models here, that's all." The sculptor continued apologetically: "I have my own method. I just need to see the live model once to imprint it in my memory, and after that. . . ."

"Well, that isn't our concern," the chairman interrupted. "I'm no judge of methods. But I've got to put you up somewhere. We'll think of something in a minute."

"That's easy," Melania said softly. "Since you've come to see me, you can stay with us. There's plenty of room."

"That's right," said the chairman, who, apparently, had been waiting for this. "It's roomy and quiet in your place. Can I depend on you, Melania?"

"Don't worry! I won't starve him!" she said.

They rose. The sculptor made to pick up his suitcase which stood in the corner of the room. But Melania was ahead of him: it was already in her hand. The protests of the visitor had no effect, she carried his baggage.

"Once she gets her hands on a thing she never let's go," said the chairman, escorting them to the porch. "That's our style!"

Melania strode lightly across the yard. The sculptor, not used to her quick pace, could barely keep up. And he felt then, more than at any other time in his life, that he was becoming tired, feeble and old.

Melania's cottage was like a pretty vignette: cool, green, tidy. The floor was laid with grass, the stove decorated with drawings of hens and cockerels, and the table covered with an embroidered table-cloth. Instead of an icon she had a little book-shelf with a magazine picture of Ulya Gromova* pinned above it.

Pots and plates appeared on the table, and the sculptor kept glancing at them with the anxious look of a man eternally pre-occupied with his diet.

"Please, not too much, I beg of you.... You see, I'm on a strict diet," he mumbled.

Melania was confused.

"What shall we do then?"

"Don't bother," he answered.

"No, tell me what you can eat. Eggs, milk, honey?"

She put a napkin before him saying: "Eat what you like, leave what you don't like. Make yourself at home. I haven't very much, but what there is, is yours for the asking."

The sculptor began to peck at the food and every mouthful seemed to stick in his throat. He would leave the next day, empty-handed, just one more defeat. Oh, how many defeats had he experienced since the war! He had been guilty of formalism, they said, after that it was patriarchalism, and then it was some other darn thing. "Maybe my eye isn't as keen as it used to be, maybe I miss points nowadays?" the sculptor thought, choking on Melania's fragrant home-made bread. "I used to make wonderful busts of generals, and now I'm stumped by a

* Ulya Gromova—one of the heroes of the Young Guard group active against the fascists during their occupation of Krasnodon.

plain working-woman. When I started out I intended making a deep study of her, to get under her skin, so to speak, and understand her lofty aspirations. But what has become of it all? Disgrace! Disappointment and scuttle! What will the chairman, and this simple and naive, this good and kind Melania think of me?"

There was a time when the sculptor never noticed such people, but at the moment they worried him, their opinions of him had become important.

"Perhaps another sculptor could have done the job?" came the merciless, accusing thought, and he recalled some of his colleagues, primarily young talented men. "Maybe they see better than I can, maybe I've worked myself out, or taken the wrong path and lost my sense of perception, can't reveal her soul? Oh, that would be terrible!"

Melania had changed into her working-clothes in the other room, and returned bare-footed, alert, attractive.

"I must go," she said. "It's my sunflowers. You can rest here. Your bed is ready."

"Thank you."

Melania left and the light seemed to go out with her: she quietly closed the shutters from the outside so that it would be cooler for her guest!

The sculptor managed to get quite a few things done before evening. He rested, and then drew sketches of the boys he had seen near the office, and, finally, accompanied by the chairman, he made the rounds of the collective farm—the dairy, smithy and power station. News of the sculptor's arrival had spread through the village and he was met jovially and politely everywhere. The talkative milkmaids bombarded him with questions—asking about the people he had sculptured, whether he made good sculptures and what posture he had selected for their Melania Chobitko.

"Make our Melania pretty so that people won't be able to take their eyes off her," they demanded. "Melania deserves it!"

When he came to the smithy the blacksmiths stopped their clatter, and, lighting cigarettes, freely answered his questions. He wanted to know, for instance, who it was that loved flowers so much?

"Our girls," they told him. "They've planted them all over the place: outside the office and the club, and even here at the forge. It all started when Melania...."

Melania again! Wherever he went it was Melania this, Melania that.

"So she's clever, this Melania of yours," he queried.

"You don't know our Melania yet," they said, "or you wouldn't ask. She's absolutely tireless, devoted,—a splendid girl."

"She always beats the sun to the fields," one said.

"Make a good job of her bust, comrade sculptor. Give your talent free rein," said another.

Give rein to his talent!... The sculptor was both moved and depressed by the respectful curiosity displayed by the collective farmers in him and in his art. He felt unworthy of the confidence they placed in him. His mind was disturbed and he felt like a man who, against his will, was taking something that was not his to take.

The conviction that he should leave the place immediately grew on him as time went on. There was no sense, he reasoned, in taking advantage of their hospitality. He was just a nuisance to these honest, hard-working people. "They're nice," he kept saying to himself, "because they're expecting big things. And what will they get? Better go away. How will they take to my flight? That's easy to guess: they'll regard me as the guilty party, not Melania and her ungainliness....

She'll be 'worth her weight in gold' whether I make the bust or not."

"That's our power plant," Ivan Fedorovich explained as they approached a dam with a solid red structure at the other end of it. "Isn't it a beauty?"

"It is," the sculptor agreed, staring at the cascade of water, at the snow-white foam. "When did you build it?"

"We finished it the year before last. It was started in 1944 when the war was still raging. Every brick was laid by women. We've got splendid women here, come to think of it. If I had your talent, I'd make sculptures of all of them, of all our heroines!"

"Try it," the sculptor smiled, "it's not as simple as all that."

"I know, but take my word for it, they deserve it!" the chairman replied. "Not so long ago, for instance, when we were still over there, fighting on the different fronts, on the Oder, at Balaton, and the other places, they were dragging the thresher about the fields just like Guardsmen, and building this dam in readiness for our return. D'you think that excavating hundreds of cubic metres of earth is easy work? By the way, Melania distinguished herself here as well, wheeling her barrow for days and nights."

Listening to the chairman, the sculptor tried to imagine Melania at her various jobs, but nothing could shake his first impression. In the field with the thresher and carting earth to the dam—Melania was the same all the time, the comely, awkward and ungainly girl he had seen that morning at the office. In vain were the chairman's efforts to correct this impression and raise Melania in his eyes. With all due respect to her every-day heroism, to her excellent work, he could find nothing, unfortunately, to make up for what was lacking in her personality.

"Your people are wonderful," he began, "and I appre-

ciate how you feel about them, Ivan Fedorovich. But I would like you to see my end of it, to understand me. . . ."

"There's nothing to understand!" the chairman replied. "You've made up your mind to leave, have you?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I'm going to town tomorrow on business and I'll give you a lift to the station."

The parting was somewhat cool. Ivan Fedorovich mumbled something about having to see the tractor crews, and headed for the steppe. The sculptor went home (as he called Melania's little cottage in his mind).

It took him a long time to get there, because he lost the way. All the cottages seemed alike, painted white and blue like Melania's, with insulators at the eaves and wires disappearing inside, windows flaming in the rays of the sun setting behind the hill on the other side of the river.

"Well, of all things," the sculptor lamented as he stood outside a gate, "I've lost my way in broad daylight. What's to be done?"

A cloud of dust, pink-hued in the setting sun, rose at the end of the street. The herd was coming home from pasture, and now he'd have to get out of the way quickly. But which way to go?

Help had arrived in the shape of the boys that he had sketched for future use. They stood behind him, outwardly indifferent, hands crossed behind their backs and biting their lips to keep from laughing. Obviously they had been following him about, had seen him pass Melania's house and exulted in his distress at the sight of the approaching herd which blocked the street in front of him.

"We'll show you the way," said a little blonde rogue of eight. "We know where you are staying."

"Where?" he asked.

"At Melania Chobitko's place."

"That's right!"

"But let's hurry. You'll be dusty from head to foot if the herd catches up with us."

"And what about you?" the sculptor joked.

"Oh, we don't care."

The sculptor followed the boys obediently.

"The cottages are all alike and I lost my bearings," he explained.

"That's at first sight," the boy replied. "But they're quite different inside."

"I suppose so," he assented.

"They're white and blue because of May-Day," another explained.

A third voice chimed in: "The shop ordered only one kind of paint, they didn't want to offend anyone. . . . Well, here we are."

"Thanks for showing me the way."

"Don't mention it."

The sculptor shut the gate behind him and sighed with relief.

Melania hadn't returned yet.

She came after sunset, carrying a sheaf of grass and a bunch of cornflowers picked along the path.

Her guest was in the garden, walking aimlessly among the greenery, smelling and fingering everything he saw.

"Taking a look round?" she asked.

"No, just interested. Is this all the land you have?"

"I can't use any more," and pointing towards the hill, she added: "My main estate lies over there. This is just the 'home farm.' "

"I only see pansies and violets here. Where are your sunflowers and maize?"

"Over there," Melania smiled, pointing again towards the hill.

The sculptor's face was serious.

"And what about vegetables—tomatoes, cabbages and things like that?" he asked.

"We get them from the collective farm. They're better and they ripen earlier," she answered.

"Is the climate better there or what?" he joked mirthlessly.

"No, the climate is the same, but the irrigation is better," Melania replied good-naturedly. "If we grow cabbage on our own plots we've got to break our backs carrying water. And there'd be no time for books and films. But the collective farm has a water-pump."

"That's interesting! What changes! Nobody sows buckwheat and rye around their cottages any longer!"

"Of course not," she answered. "Our rye and buckwheat are in the fields. You can't have crop rotation in cottage gardens! It's about time, too, that room was made for flowers and fruit trees. We want them around the cottage and we get everything else from the collective-farm fields.

"So all your crops are out there in the fields?"

"All my crops and all of me," the girl laughed.

Her good humour pleased the sculptor. He wanted to see the expression of her face, but the evening had darkened and he saw nothing but her silhouette with the sheaf in her arms.

"Well, it's time to go indoors," Melania said, "I have a Komsomol meeting tonight. You've got the key?"

"Yes, if I haven't lost it."

"Leave it here next time, behind the shutter," she said.

"Oh, I'm going away tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes," he replied. "Perhaps I'll come back in the autumn."

"In the autumn, my eye," she thought, "he isn't telling the truth—I'm not suitable as a model, he doesn't like me."

Unlocking the door, she murmured gruffly: "As you please." But she spoke with a tone of suppressed injury.

The sculptor maintained a guilty silence. He would have liked to explain to her and console her. But would she understand?

He remained outside in the porch, ashamed to go indoors. Melania switched on the radio and went about her household duties. What did she think of him? She knew, doubtlessly, she wasn't as naive as he imagined her to be.

A group of girls came for Melania, her team-mates probably. Feigning fright at sight of the sculptor in his white suit, they slipped past him into the house, filling the room with their chatter. The name Dmitro, from the Khvili Komunizma Collective Farm, cropped up again and again in their conversation; it turned out that this Dmitro was in love with Melania. And the sculptor was no longer surprised that there was someone in love with her.

It was a wonderful, star-lit evening, the cool refreshing air was filled with the bracing aroma of night flowers. Somewhere near the club a loudspeaker relayed a concert from the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

Melania came out with the girls, dressed in her best. She told her guest that the table was laid and, slipping her arms in those of her companions, she vanished in the dusk. Their merry laughter rang in the ears of the sculptor and he took it for granted that they were laughing at him. However, he felt no offence. Wearily, he rose and went to his bedroom.

Next morning the sculptor left the collective farm.

He had not said farewell even to Melania. She had gone to work in the fields before he had opened his eyes. His breakfast was waiting for him on the table. He locked the door of the hospitable house and left the key behind the green shutter, as he had been told the day before.

He sat at the chairman's side in the swaying gig and thought how awkward it was to leave without saying good-bye to Melania. It really looked like flight.

"Ivan Fedorovich," he said to the chairman finally, "can we drive to the field in which Melania is working?"

"Why not," the chairman replied. "It's slightly out of our way, but we can do it...." Turning to the driver, he said: "To No. 2 brigade, Mishka."

"What crop is that?" asked the sculptor, pointing to a green shrub-like plantation.

"Arakhis," the chairman told him.

"What? First time I've heard of it."

"Ground-nuts. Better known as roasted peanuts. But they don't grow roasted," he added.

The narrow road stretched steeply upwards between bush-covered hill-sides. The sky gleamed blue in front, and mile after mile of river meadows filled the broad valley below. Away in the distance the river glistened peacefully, its banks dotted with the white cottages. Melania's little house with its wing-like shutters looked askance at the sculptor with its sparkling windows, as though turning away from its guest of the short stay.

The horses snorted under the strain of the uphill climb, and they had to alight. Walking along the side of the road, the sculptor kept picking up lumps of clay and kneading them in his fingers. "It's rich!" he murmured, addressing the chairman. "Good stuff for sculpturing!"

"There you are," the chairman replied, "yet you won't stay. To be frank, I had designs on you. I wanted you to do some figures for our club.... Something really good.... We have all the clay you want!"

As they came out on the top of the hill the sculptor suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"I say," he exclaimed, catching his breath, "what's that?"

He was in a transport of delight—stunned and overwhelmed by the sight that lay before him: the broad valley was ablaze with the gold of the sunflowers that reached away to the horizon, their magnificently radiant crowns, bright and yellow, turned to their heavenly counterpart—to the sun. Everything around them was gay, brilliant and enchanting—a veritable playground of the sun.

The very air gave the impression of being tinged with gold.

The driver reined up and leisurely lit a cigarette, while the chairman and sculptor went towards the sunflowers. An intoxicating aroma of indescribable sweetness came from the sunny blooms.

"These are Melania's," the chairman explained with obvious pleasure, "there's a sign up to that effect, read it. The other teams are working farther on."

The sculptor, entranced with the sight, could not take his eyes from the miles and miles of the yellow-crowned sun-drenched fraternity.

"This is heavenly!" he repeated softly. "It's hard to believe that all this dazzling, perfect beauty grew out of common grey matter, out of dust, here on earth!"

"It didn't grow of itself," returned the chairman, "we planted it, we tended it,—and here you see the result. People, plus technique, and, of course, the help of nature. That's what sculptured them!"

A kerchief rose from the depths of the plantation like a white dove. It was followed by a second, a third....

"Sculptured, you say?" the sculptor asked.

"Yes! and by a master hand at that! Every occupation, you know, has its masters and its inspiration!"

The girls slowly approached the road, walking between the tall plants. The sunflowers behaved in a strange way where they passed. Casting off their majestic immobility, they suddenly came to life, pecked each other in a mo-

mentary kiss, and then, straightening up again, parted, smiled freely and winked roguishly at the sun.

"What are they doing?" asked the astonished sculptor.

"Don't you know? Artificial pollination. We can't afford to wait for nature's gifts, so to say!"

In the leading girl the sculptor recognized Melania. So that's what the real Melania is like! There was something majestic about her, in bearing, glance and movements. She appeared to be floating towards him, rising from the golden, sweet-smelling ocean, proudly erect, bending the flowers lightly and rhythmically. Absorbed in her work she did not see the sculptor. Her face reflected the flush of inspiration; lit up with new thoughts, it had become thinner, finer, and unexpected colours appeared in it.

The sculptor felt the years drop from his shoulders, felt his talent and ability surging up. Remember her as she is now, take in every detail, mould her, his brain repeated over and over. He wanted to begin work, right away, this very minute!

"Good morning, girls!" the chairman shouted, rising on tiptoe. "The bees are complaining that you're taking their bread from them!"

The pollen floated above the girls like a golden haze, settling on kerchiefs, brows and eye-lashes.

Melania looked speechlessly at the sculptor, as if trying to remember who he was and what he was doing here. Flushed and filled with happiness she was in another world, a world in which her will ruled, where she was free and natural. There was no trace of the ungainliness that had so irritated the sculptor the day before.

"Melania," he whispered. "Melania!"

Excitement kept him tongue-tied. The girl waited with dignity for what would follow. Her eyes were shining, the tender sunflowers caressed her shoulders and breast with their fragrant crowns.

"Melania," the chairman hurried to the rescue, "our visitor is leaving. He wanted to. . . ."

"He wanted nothing," the sculptor interrupted with unexpected firmness. "I'm not leaving. I'm staying right here. I'll put up my workshop in the field, directly under the sun!"

Melania exchanged glances with the girls, and smiled gently, "As you please."

She stepped between the rows of sunflowers, and a minute later her plump, sunburnt hands again plunged among the blooms, holding them with girlish tenderness and classical grace.

Following her example, the other girls picked up where they had left off, and the golden grove rustled again, the gay sunflowers returned to their kissing and the girls moved to the other end of the field.

"Let me have my suitcase," said the sculptor without turning to the gig, "and you can go."

He stood motionless, as though enchanted. For him everything had passed into oblivion, only the sea of yellow remained, and the white kerchief, and the graceful movement of gentle hands rhythmically striking the golden cymbals.

ON THE ROAD

When they nominated Trofim Sidorovich Glukhenky for the position of chairman he gave them fair warning:

"Think it over," he said, "you're nominating the devil to drive you.... I warn you in advance, I'll give you no rest."

"Drive us, Trofim Sidorovich," the collective farmers answered, "we want the farm to be well run!"

Chairman Glukhenky managed the collective farm firmly and efficiently.

The Pyatiletka Collective Farm is located in the Dnieproges district, and Glukhenky soon had everything running on electric power: the water-pump and workshops, the farm buildings and threshing-floors.... His tireless brain knew no rest. Trofim Sidorovich looked into everything, improved and rationalized wherever possible and made every sector yield more.

A drain from the neighbouring factory ran through the fields of the collective farm. The water was thick and greasy, and covered with a film of oil. Glukhenky sniffed disapprovingly every time he came near it.

"This won't do," he decided at last.

He had filters installed which separated the oil, and the water was used to irrigate the cabbage. The oil wasn't wasted either: Glukhenky collected it and put it on sale.

Rigid he was, and a bit stingy too—no use hiding the fact. Marina Khizhniak, agronomist and chairman of the Chervonnaya Steppe Collective Farm—Pyatiletka's rival in the socialist emulation—once asked him for the motor boat to transport hay from the river meadows.

"No, no, and again no," said Glukhenky waving his arms, "you should have your own boat."

"But our farm is away in the steppe," the agronomist told him. "No river flows through our fields. What do you think I'd want a boat for?"

"Hm, so you want me to think for you! Well, I've got enough thinking of my own to do!"

And he refused her the motor boat, saying he wanted to take cucumbers to the trans-shipment point.

Speaking at a district conference of collective-farm chairmen some time later, Marina didn't fail to mention the motor boat incident and a number of other things.

"You're a gruff, unfriendly type of person, Comrade Glukhenky," said Marina as she opened up against her neighbour, "I can't imagine how you'll make out in communist society. You like to take with both hands and give nothing in return.... Isn't that the truth? You grab all the machinery you can lay hands on, and you begin harvesting at the same time as the other collective farms, sometimes earlier, but the first government receipt for grain delivery is always given to others!"

The agronomist was obviously referring to last year's delivery of grain quotas when she had been the first.

"No chance of beating you to it!" Glukhenky snapped back, "you're ready to deliver grain unprocessed, just for the sake of being first!"

But Marina refused to be side-tracked by Trofim Sidorovich. She was the type that, once started, would never let you go till she had turned you inside out! Just think, she even mentioned the sardines! When they go to town, she said, the other chairmen go to the Anchor tea-

shop and have breakfast together, but Comrade Glukhenky always eats alone, like a kulak; he hides himself under a cart and stuffs himself with fish, heads and all!

But she went too far there. The conference secretary stopped her.

"You can criticize," he said, "but you must not make personal allusions."

Trofim Sidorovich was deeply hurt, he could hardly control himself. Was he really as black as Marina had painted him? Did he do these things for his own benefit? Why should she offend him in this way? He was devoted to his collective farm heart and soul. He knew no rest himself, never let his wife stay home even for a single day, and the whole family worked in the fields.

His daughter, a student, who had come home to spend the summer vacation, had no sooner crossed the threshold than he ordered her to the fields.

"Off to the fields, Vasilina," he had said, "we're short of binders!"

His daughter grinned and exchanged glances with her mother. It was no use arguing: she knew her father too well for that.

Trofim Sidorovich had no liking for meetings and conferences. As a rule he attended them only when he had something to boast about, or when he felt that the others were going to praise him. At other times he let the Party organizer go alone.

"Go ahead, Fedorovich.... You can take criticism better than I can."

But on festive occasions they appeared in the district town together, both dressed in their best, both clean-shaven.

When harvesting begins Trofim Sidorovich spends the nights as well as the days in the fields, sleeping on the threshing-floor in the fresh, sweet-smelling straw.

In the morning he rises with the sun: in his army boots, narrow-bottomed trousers and his beloved blue overalls—the same as those worn by the workers of the near-by factory. Straw sticks out from behind his ears; thick black eyebrows meet on the bridge of his nose, his face is grim and tanned, as though forged from red copper; this living copper is streaked with lines and furrows; his neck is swarthy and thin, nothing but muscles and sinew, and even his ears give the impression of gristly twisted muscles; his eyes, never at rest, are always seeking something.

At the height of the harvesting work on the threshing-floors goes on round the clock. When the long summer day ends and the sultry heat gives way to the soft velvet-like warmth of the blue southern night, electric bulbs light up the threshing-floors.

At night-time the steppe is ablaze with light from the open-air workshops of the big and small grain-processing factories—from the power-driven threshers of the collective and state farms.

The motors drone like busy bees and the people are barely visible in the dust and smoke; come to think of it, there are not many people around the threshers—electric power has taken the place of much man-power; it drives the thresher, the winnowing-machine, turns the fans that blow the straw somewhere into the darkness, straight on to the stacks. A girl stands away up there, towering over everything, wearing goggles and armlets that cover her elbows. She nimbly catches the sheaf, slashes it with a knife and it flies loose. Then another, and another, for the machine won't wait; if she loses an instant it roars hungrily, complaining to the young operator, and to Trofim Sidorovich, and to all those down on the threshing-floor.

The wheat flows without let-up in a dry, crisp stream,

rising in the middle of the floor into the golden mound so dear to the heart of the grower.

Trofim Sidorovich never closed an eye the first night of the threshing. He was determined that his Pyatiletka would get the first government receipt of the year. In the middle of the night he dispatched a motor-cyclist to the river-port with samples of the wheat. The messenger reported on his return that so far no one else had brought samples and that none were expected until the morning.

At sunrise they started loading grain on to the lorry. Trofim Sidorovich's enthusiasm infected the others, and the boys and girls hustled and bustled. Even long-legged Yashko, the lorry-driver, broke the rule this time and willingly assisted in the loading. The Komsomol girls pinned a poster to the side of the lorry: "The first grain for the state!"

Nor did the chairman stand around with folded arms. He carried sacks of grain until his neck became red from the strain.

"Since we've decided to be the first to complete delivery," he kept saying, "let's be the first to start delivery! Let them all know that we're second to none, that we'll give all we have for our dear country!"

When the lorry was loaded, Trofim Sidorovich announced that he would accompany it to the wharf.

The loaders piled in at the back of the lorry, the chairman sat with the driver. They met the Party organizer as they were leaving and he told them what he had heard on the radio call-over.

"Well, what did they have to say, Fedorovich?" Glukhenky asked.

"Many were criticized for being slow with siloing. We came in for a bit too."

"Did they do nothing but scold all night? Didn't they have anything else to say?"

"The night's long since over!" the Party organizer waved his hand. "Drive on, don't waste time."

"Did you meet anyone with grain on your way?" the chairman asked.

"No, I didn't," Fedorovich replied, "but they'll soon be on the road, if you want my opinion."

"Go on, Yashko, step on it!" Glukhenky shouted to the driver, and planted his feet firmly on the floor of the driver's cabin.

The lorry went off at top speed.

"Quicker!" Glukhenky said, as they came out on to the gravelled highway.

Yashko, who was not the type that worried overmuch about his tyres, nodded towards the speedometer:

"Can't do any more, that's ceiling!" he shouted back.

"Can't you lift the ceiling a bit!" Glukhenky insisted. "A chance like this doesn't come our way very often!"

There was no sign of fresh tyre-tracks on the road, and Trofim Sidorovich brightened visibly. He was the first to ride the road to the wharf this year. No one would catch him now....

In a day or two the traffic would be heavy on these roads. The hapless gopher intent on crossing the highway would have to sit for hours in the roadside grass, swallowing dust and waiting for the mighty, grain-laden lorries to pass.

It was a glorious morning. Although the sun had just risen, it was already hot. The lorry roared past places familiar to Trofim Sidorovich since childhood. The land here once belonged to a count, and more than one generation of Glukhenkys had worked their fingers to the bone on it.... He—Trofim Glukhenky—was born in one of these fields beside a stack. The count was not much of a farmer. The soil was badly cultivated, crop rotation in those days was a joke and yields were poor. If only they could bring the count here on a leash, for the fun of it,

and let him see how the children of his serfs were running the farm! He would probably think he was dreaming.

In the east, away on the horizon, are the young forest shelter belts. Combines swim in the golden sea of wheat, winged harvesters chirr in the distance, the first half-stacks are rising in groups. The pylons carrying the high-tension cable stretch straight across ravine and hillock, like long-legged girls with yokes on their shoulders. Familiar villages sprawl in the valleys, and near by are the shops of the Pervaya Yuzhnaya Factory. In the west, on the other side of the road, the green river meadows stretch to the very end of the earth, intersected by the quaint tracery of sunlit Dnieper tributaries. Luxuriant vegetable gardens and irrigated plantations are patterned among them.

"Soil is the thing!" Trofim Sidorovich began suddenly, obviously bent on good-humoured philosophizing. "Look at those peanuts over there, next to them is cayenne pepper.... And after the pepper come the water-melons, gathering their honeyed sweetness, then the tomatoes and the golden sunflowers....

"Not even the cleverest machine can produce what the soil yields!"

Yashko sat behind the wheel, straight as a ram-rod, his elbows sticking out at both sides.

"You know, Yashko, I've decided to buy a Moskvich next year," the chairman confessed unexpectedly. "Don't you think it's about time I had a car?"

"Take me for your driver, Trofim Sidorovich," Yashko begged. "I'll look after it like I would after a baby!... I did forty thousand kilometres in a car during the war and always kept it spick and span."

"No objection," the chairman replied. "It will take time before I'm able to drive myself. I'll come speeding to a conference, and I know some people that will be green

with envy. That Khizhniak woman—you know who I mean, the one with the long tongue—she has no great opinion of Trofim Glukhenky: he puts on his wrap-around and ties it with a string, she thinks, there's nothing more to him.... But Trofim wants culture too! Can't I see what science has given us?... And as for having the car—well, my mind's made up about that...."

"You can rely on me, Trofim Sidorovich ..." Yashko laughed loudly and triumphantly, "we'll go out of our way and pass Marina's windows."

A loud report put an end to the banter, the lorry swerved sharply, Yashko jammed on the brake.

Both of them jumped out of the cabin, and Yashko scratched his forehead disconsolately as he gazed at the burst tyre.

"Stop scratching and start repairing it at once," Trofim Sidorovich attacked him, looking anxiously down the road, "I always thought you were a dawdler. When you're not scratching your head, you're picking your ears!"

The loaders jumped off the lorry and offered to help Yashko. Trofim Sidorovich also wanted to be useful, but didn't know how.

While Yashko was engaged in jacking up the vehicle, dismantling the wheel and changing the inner tube, Trofim Sidorovich kept glancing impatiently down the road. He was afraid that someone would overtake him. What rotten luck!... He had worked hard all night, done everything in time and now, when only a stone's throw from the wharf, that wretched tyre had upset the apple-cart.

"Ready," Yashko reported happily, "we'll pump it up in a jiffy, and just let anyone try and catch up with us."

Yashko poked his head into the cabin and tinkered about in his tool-box.

Glukhenky watched him intently, sensing trouble by the expressive hunch of Yashko's bent back.

"Are you going to take all day?" he queried.

Yashko turned round, distraught, disappointed, desperate.

"I . . . I . . . left the pump behind . . ." he mumbled.

Trofim Sidorovich felt his heart miss a beat. The blood rushed to his face.

"You haven't left your head behind, have you? Well, what are you standing there for? Pump it up! I don't care how you do it, so long it is done!. . . I've given you too much rope, pampered you too much! I gave you a motor pump to play about at home and now you won't have anything to do with a hand pump, will you? You've left it behind, lost it!"

"I haven't lost it," Yashko defended himself. "It's in the garage, on the shelf."

"D'you think I'll ever trust you with another lorry? D'you think I'll let you drive my Moskvich? There, that's all the Moskvich you'll ever see, you good-for-nothing!" And heedless of the smirking loaders, Trofim Sidorovich bent close to Yashko and thumbed his nose at him.

There was nothing to be done about it. He might just as well sit on the footboard and cry his eyes out for all the good it would do him!

"Someone's coming, I think," said one of the loaders guiltily, a sunburnt, shock-headed lad who studied at the agricultural institute.

Glukhenky looked back angrily: he wasn't worried about anyone coming from the opposite direction, what he feared was someone catching him up. Yes, a vehicle was raising a cloud of dust down the road. The approaching lorry was running at high speed, its windshield gleaming in the sun.

"Signal them to stop, all of you," Trofim Sidorovich ordered. His own arm trembled, an unknown power was pulling it up into the air.

"It's the Chervonnaya Steppe," Yashko growled suddenly. "It's their ZIS!"

"Nonsense!" Glukhenky shouted, and stamped his foot. "Get out of my sight!"

But a minute later Trofim Sidorovich had to acknowledge the bitter truth: it really was the Chervonnaya Steppe lorry.

"Don't signal," he choked, and his arms dropped limply to his sides. Glukhenky could have suffered anything but this, this was adding insult to injury.

He was the picture of helplessness and misery as he stepped back out of the way of the lorry, and doubly so as it roared past and wagged at him defiantly with its copper-coloured tail of thick dust. He had seen Marina Khizhniak in the cabin and ground his teeth. Grin and bear it, Comrade Glukhenky: you've just got to, there is no choice but to swallow the dust raised by her lorry....

Humiliated, and more dead than alive, Trofim Sidorovich had not noticed the long-legged Yashko and the loaders behind his back signalling the ZIS.

After passing them the ZIS suddenly swerved to the right and stopped. The bewhiskered driver climbed out of the cabin on one side, Marina Khizhniak on the other. Trofim Sidorovich darted behind his lorry, making it appear that he was seeking a shady spot.

Yashko rushed off to borrow the pump. In his heart of hearts Trofim Sidorovich approved Yashko's shameless behaviour, although he, himself, would not have done it to save his life.

"What's the matter, is the dry road too slippy for you?" Marina's voice rang out. "Ah, and there's the president himself! What have you got there, Comrade Glukhenky?"

Throwing a glance at the load, Marina scooped up a handful of grain.

"Fine wheat! Ripe and full," she said, viewing it.

Glukhenky stood looking at the field, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Marina standing by the lorry in her chrome-leather highboots, tall and slim. A heavy ball of greyish hair was gathered in a net at the back of her head—so heavy that it seemed to pull Marina's head back. Her shoulders, as usual, were slightly raised, as though long, bony wings were folded behind them.

"How much per hectare, if it isn't a secret?" Marina asked.

"About thirty centners," Glukhenky mumbled.

Marina pretended she had not noticed his tone.

"We've got about the same.... Whatever you say, Comrade Glukhenky, our bet on winter wheat is the best. Winter wheat never lets one down."

"I never advocated spring wheat ..." he growled back.

"I never said that you did, keep your peace. It was just my way of putting it."

With one ear Glukhenky heard the two drivers tinkering about with the wheel, laughing and calling someone an "ace."

When they were ready to take the road again, another unforeseen problem arose: who should lead the way? He never doubted that Marina would. Her driver had the motor started already. In a second he would be raising clouds of dust....

Yet Marina chose otherwise. Taking Glukhenky by the shoulders, she pushed him amiably but insistently towards the cabin.

"Get going, you are first by right," she smiled.

"But you would have been there by now, if it hadn't been for us ..." he tried to protest.

"If it hadn't been for the 'buts' you'd be making your second trip, wouldn't you? Get going! You don't think I want to make a name for myself on other people's bad luck, do you?"

Red as a lobster, Glukhenky took the lead.

The wharf was gaily adorned with slogans and posters. Flower patches blazed brightly. The gates of the clean-swept, disinfected granaries were wide open. Laboratory assistants with white aprons tied over their dresses, fluttered about with proudly worried looks, an overdose of politeness, and we're-heroes-of-the-day faces. A newly-painted barge, the word "Grain" inscribed in large letters on its side, lay alongside the wharf. A conveyor had been attached to it from the yard of the grain-collecting station.

The Pyatiletka Collective Farm lorry was on the scales. And bunker to bunker behind the Chervonnaya Steppe ZIS stood a string of trucks loaded with grain. Among them were lorries from the Zavety Ilyicha, Proletary, and other collective farms.... More lorries appeared every few minutes through the tall archway, driving out of the dazzling heat of the steppe, out of the huge, boundless workshops of the sun.

Pocketing the first grain receipt of the year, Trofim Sidorovich bore himself with the calm and the dignity of one used to such things. The scale attendants shook hands with him and he thanked them, and only then did he heave a sigh of relief and, squaring his shoulders, allowed a happy smile to blossom on his face.... It wasn't very often that Trofim Glukhenky smiled in this manner, but when he did, he wore his heart on his sleeve, his defences were down, he became childishly trusting. People wanted to pet and coddle him at such moments.

Chairmen coming in from the other collective farms congratulated Trofim Sidorovich on opening the grain deliveries and fulfilling the first commandment of the collective farm.

"You've beaten us by a nose, Sidorovich..." they grinned good-naturedly.

"I suppose you dried your winter wheat in the oven!"

"You've opened the score—let's see who'll be first to close it!"

"Wait and see!" Trofim Sidorovich grinned challengingly.

They breakfasted together in the shade.

"By right we should have shared the first receipt with you, Marina Opanasovna," Glukhenky said with rare generosity. "I owe my priority to Marina Opanasovna, comrades chairmen."

"And did we hurry!" Yashko bragged meanwhile, sprawling near by in the company of his colleagues. "We travelled at the speed of sound! The chief yelled in my ear that his ear-drums were bursting, but I just kept stepping on the gas!"

The conveyor began to move. The first grain poured into the barge in a thick, even, reddish-golden stream. Trofim Sidorovich lovingly watched the crisp, fragrant rush, which would now merge with other golden rivers, golden oceans of new Soviet grain.

"That's ours," Trofim Sidorovich remarked, turning to Marina.

"Ours," she repeated thoughtfully, watching the conveyor.

"Well, its time we were on the way," Glukhenky rose. "Get ready, Yashko. The worry you caused me today! I should have given you straw for breakfast instead of fish."

"I'm ready," Yashko said humbly, "I've lined my jacket wonderfully."

They climbed in side by side, and the lorry started, swerving out of the way of other vehicles, honking endlessly, jarring and bouncing on the turns. Then it plunged between the rows of poplars lining the wide, straight highway, and sped off with the throttle wide open.

SKYLARK

I

Here in the treeless southern steppe hosts and hosts of birds gathered in the autumn. Here, for the last time before setting out on their distant flight across the seas, they fed and rested. Every cottage had its feathered lodgers—the children caught the plump and lazy quails almost with their bare hands.

And now the birds were on their way back from beyond the seas, lean, light and nimble. They chirped along the shore, hopped about on the steppe and under the windows of the Solonchany Machine and Tractor Station without fear of man or motor, seeking to still their spring hunger in these familiar surroundings.

The warbling of the feathered tribe awakened Zoya. Father's cap, she noticed, was not on the nail. The bird fair was in full chatter beneath her window, the yard was a medley of noises, and people were hurrying back and forth. Tractors stood lined up by the workshops, with their engines facing the steppe, and the MTS people had turned out for their traditional opening of spring.

"They've all gone out! And I'm still here!" Zoya thought. She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly. Her hair, washed the night before, smelled faintly of strawberry soap. Zoya wound it into a firm dark ball. It seemed but yesterday that she had been plaiting braids in two loops like a little girl, but this spring she had begun to follow the style of the grown-up girls. She wore

high-heeled shoes, although she was tall enough without them, and she was as slim and supple as a green poplar.

The first tractors had already started when Zoya rushed outdoors. Today the drivers were clutching the wheel with a special swagger. Karp Vasilievich Lisogor, Zoya's father and manager of the MTS, strode up and down the line of tractors with his deputy, giving final orders to the team leaders. Excited and anxious, he did not notice his daughter. It seemed that the men setting out for the steppe were nearer and dearer to him this minute than Zoya. As she passed him he shouted to them over her head:

"The best of luck!"

Zoya longed to be up there in the driver's seat, to press on the pedals and move out into the steppe, into the bright spring expanses. The sky out there was blue, bracing and high, higher than usual. The earth, awakening from its winter sleep, gave off intoxicating scents and the birds hovering above, tried out their voices.

Why couldn't she, Zoya, sit at the tractor wheel in her overalls, like Oksana Boyko, the renowned driver? Then father would be sure to wish her success, and Savva Grek, the handsome mechanic, would come flouncing after her, just as he was flouncing around Oksana this very minute....

"Let me drive a little bit, Oksana," Zoya pleaded, "only to the gates."

"No, my girl, this isn't switching on the radio! This iron steed of mine is a bit techy: it might drive you, instead of you driving it."

"I can manage," said Zoya. "I've had a go before, haven't I?"

"You might lose control!"

"In any case Karp Vasilievich is looking this way," Savva, the mechanic, cut in, winking to Oksana. "For all we know, he might give Oksana a reprimand!"

They laughed, and Zoya, confused and cut up, blushed scarlet.

"I know how you feel, Zoya," Oksana said sympathetically, "when I was fifteen I used to see tractors in my dreams every night!"

"Not fifteen—seventeen!" Zoya wanted to shout back, so that Oksana should know and not put on airs, so that Savva should know, too.

But father was near by.

He came to a stop at Oksana's tractor, tapped its mudguard gently, and said:

"An old crock! Used to cross the Don on its own steam.... D'you think it'll see the season through, Oksana?"

"Definitely, Karp Vasilievich, and not just this season. Appearances are deceptive; it has a youthful temperament," Oksana replied.

"Youthful, did you say?" the manager grinned.

Catching sight of his daughter he cast a surprised, strangely unfamiliar glance at her. Zoya, feeling hot and flustered, retreated hastily into the crowd of onlookers.

She hid herself behind the grease-stained overalls of the mechanics, and listened. She didn't like Oksana and father exchanging jokes and she found their amiable conversation disagreeable. And what was most unpleasant was the way Oksana laughed and flirted, tossing her golden curls. For a second Zoya fancied what it would be like if father were to bring Oksana into their home, if she were to become Zoya's....

II

Fresh tracks stretched from the MTS to the neighbouring collective farms. The tractors had gone, the yard was empty and spacious. The morning air rang with the velvety music of engines. Smoke curled on the horizon

above the trailers—the steppe dwellings of the tractor-crews with their light-blue curtains in the windows, and the slender antennae rising into the sky, delicate and sensitive.

There were seventeen of these trailers in the field, widely separated from each other and barely visible in the cut-glass haze engirdling the steppe, their wheels embedded in the soil of the collective farms serviced by the Solonchany MTS. The country was flat, having once been the bottom of the sea. From the watch-tower the sea itself was visible in the south; it appeared level with the land, even higher.

Seventeen trailers—seventeen antennae, and all of them listening at their far-flung posts to field head-quarters.

The cluster of buildings which made up the machine and tractor station, stood in the middle of the steppe and was visible for miles. The fascists destroyed the MTS when they retreated, but it had been restored now and roofed with speckled tiles: workshops, dwellings, office and garage.... A little way off stood the fuel stores—white tanks embedded deep in the ground.

In winter the yard was packed with machines, fires burnt in the forges day and night, machines hummed and the neglected book-keepers pined away in office-corners, giving up their desks to the imperious people of the steppe. Conferences, seminars and study courses for farm mechanics were in full swing.

Zoya's transmitter was installed in the building next to the manager's office. Zoya was the radio-operator. It was to her that the seventeen trailer antennae listened with their sensitive tips. Maintaining radio-communication with the field-teams kept Zoya in the mainstream of all the flaming passions of men carried away by their toil—brigade leaders, mechanics, and checkers. She was

the first to take their messages, hers was the first voice that they heard.

In the spring, when the tractors were busy day and night, Zoya's part in the game increased distinctly. She found unending delight in her work, which knit her to the collective she loved and which was her sure support in life.

Zoya became especially friendly with the MTS people during the war years. That school of friendship and the severe trials experienced as a child,—served her in good stead now that she had fully feathered, as the MTS watchman expressed it.

There was that far-away war-time summer when the Solonchany MTS moved east with all its tractors and machines. Zoya would remember it to her dying day.

... The southern steppe was in the grip of a dry, suffocating heat, the children wept in the shacks, and spotters constantly warned of approaching enemy aeroplanes.

Day after day they rumbled along the dusty highway.

... They were short of drivers, many of whom had been called to the army or had joined the partisans, but not a single tractor was left behind. Karp Vasilievich mobilized the drivers' families—women and children. He put his own wife in the driver's seat, told her what to do and started the motor.

"Drive!" he commanded.

Zoya bounced up and down by her mother's side. The vehicles were strung out over miles of road. Scores of powerful tractors, dust-covered combines, multiple ploughs and threshers, workshops, trailers with the paint peeling—all had been put on wheels, everything travelled according to the strict itinerary marked off on the map which Lisogor, a veteran Communist, kept in his breast-pocket.

Zoya rarely spoke to her father during the march. With the sharp brain of the child she perceived his every-day greatness, his unbending will-power.

He was the soul of the column, its inspired leader. His battered roadster hustled up and down night and day, taking him from one end of the column to the other. He took in things at a glance and divined the innermost thoughts and intentions of his subordinates long before they had matured in their own minds. He brought cheer to the exhausted, restrained the over-zealous, and imparted his will, his deliberate tempo and calculated rhythm, to the pulsating life of the march.

Hurrying past their tractor he threw a quick glance at wife and daughter. Unshaven, lean and covered with grime, he followed them intently with his eyes, threw a curt, almost rough: "keep your distance!" at them, and was off.

On one occasion the column got caught in quicksands. They had to lay a road through several miles of it; they cut scrub, hauled it to the road and placed it under the tractors and combines. Zoya had worked alongside the grown-ups.

Although they were now in strange places and unfamiliar surroundings, Karp Vasilievich acted as one who was part proprietor. Zoya recalled how they came to a large railway station that had just been bombed by the enemy. It was an ugly sight: the lines were chock-a-block with trains, there were bomb craters everywhere and fires were raging around.... Shells were exploding and the numerous gasoline-tanks would burst into flames any moment....

Some of the column panicked: let's get out of it, they pleaded, let's make a detour and get away from this hell! In any case, what had this out-of-the-way station to do with Karp Lisogor? He could afford to by-pass it and refuel elsewhere. But no! Lisogor summoned the Commu-

nist Party and Komsomol members, and took them into the inferno where everything was twisted, crackling and breathing fire. Their powerful tractors hauled freight cars and gasoline tanks out of reach of the fire.

How Zoya had wished she were a grown-up, and like father!

Then came the snows. The severe winter made things even more difficult. But even there, away on the other bank of the Don, where the MTS had pitched camp, its people prepared for the sowing just as if they were home in Solonchany. The workshops were too small, they had to work outdoors in the severe frost, and mother often left the skin of her fingers on the grey, cold metal. They slept in the cold, unheated trailers, and in the mornings mother's hair would be frozen to the wall.

They had been in the front-line trenches, as Zoya put it, in the front lines across the Don, where she lost her mother.

The homeward journey to the Ukraine was made by railway. Every item was brought back, nothing was left behind or lost. Even the faded trailers were securely mounted on flat-cars. The war was still raging, but the army commandants gave the green light to the peaceful Solonchany train.

Oksana Boyko had taken part in the march; she had been a friend of Zoya's mother. Zoya still recalled what this friendship had meant to Oksana, when her husband, a tractor-driver, disappeared beneath the ice at one of the river crossings.

Neither Zoya nor Oksana had ever dreamed that the day would come when this Savva, this handsome black-browed youth, would come on the scene and sow seeds of strife between them....

III

"I wonder if people will be jealous in communist society?" Zoya pondered, as she pored over the sheets of a correspondence-course lecture in the radio-room. "Will the discords of human emotion ever cease, will everybody live and work without upsets?"

It had always been her belief that feelings such as jealousy, envy and vanity could be overcome provided one made the effort.

But that was before she experienced them herself. And now came the bitter, humiliating realization. Her unclouded relations with people were giving way to emotions of a different sort.

"Our little lark is as happy as the day is long!" the tractor-drivers used to say about Zoya. Indeed, they had become used to her just as they had become used to the lark that warbled above their heads all during the spring. And they reacted to her in the same way as they did to the feathered herald of spring—with tender admiration, good-natured politeness and complete confidence. These weather-beaten men of the steppe knew that the dispatcher would never let them down, that communications would always be in perfect order, that Zoya would never complain about the language which occasionally reached her radio-room from the field-sets. It was taken for granted that Zoya would forgive—she was to them what the medical sister was to front-line soldiers.

And Zoya forgave.

The men in every field team knew that Zoya was *their* fan, that she rejoiced at their success. Oksana Boyko knew this too. But would things be the same now? Could it be that something strange and insincere had entered Zoya's radio-room?

Zoya had the reputation of being everybody's well-wisher.

During the season she was always the first to know what was on the minds of the men away in the fields. Their joys and passions came to her first-hand through the earphones of her receiver. Joy always came fresh, hot and unbridled, doubt and worry was expressed bluntly, and the rebukes would be sharp and unsparing.

She had to listen to everything, even to the things that hurt her girlish sensitivity, yet she remembered only the points that mattered, the rest she discarded.

And so it was now. After patiently listening to a long statement by Palivoda she ignored the superfluous and made a brief and precise entry in her log: Palivoda's tractor has had a breakdown, caused by ... he has done ... to straighten it out. She looked at herself in the mirror, and, leaving the radio-room, headed across the yard for the garage.

She was in a gay mood, her thin lips twitched, keeping back a smile. She cocked her head slightly to one side, as usual, and straightened her rose-coloured kerchief. Her face was soft and tender as a child's, and there was something unconsciously feminine in the movements of her lissom figure girdled with a narrow belt.

The Stormy Petrel—their emergency repairs lorry—was in readiness outside the garage. It was well equipped, and had a radio like the trailers. Savva, the mechanic, was in charge of it.

Savva saluted the radio-operator impishly. He was wearing an officer's riding-breeches and a blue slip-on; he was slim and tanned as the devil himself, and mischievous imps gambolled impudently in his sparkling eyes.

"Greetings to the skylark! What is the order of the day?" he said cheerfully.

Zoya gazed at him from under her kerchief with wide-open eyes. There was surprise in her look, her eyes moistened and shone with unusual brilliance.

"Palivoda has had a breakdown. The NAT is out," she told him.

"Again Palivoda?! When, at last, will you send me to ... Oksana?"

"Don't worry; you'll be sent whenever you're needed. But it isn't often that she needs help, is it?"

"Unfortunately!" he said.

"On the contrary!" she parried.

Told about Palivoda's needs and cursing him banteringly, Savva ran to the workshop to get the spare parts.

Zoya had done her job, but something rooted her to the spot. She had told Savva she would send him to Oksana if she needed help.... But would she? It wouldn't be easy, but....

Returning to his lorry, Savva, half in earnest, tried to embrace her with his free hand.

"Fine little bride growing up for someone!"

Zoya evaded him and slapped him lightly on his hot, firm back.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Savva...." And stood there, as if waiting for something.

The Stormy Petrel started off, gathered speed and plunged into the steppe. A fine dust rose in its wake. Only the day before there had been no dust. But the wind quickly dried the soil. Rain! Rain was needed urgently!

Zoya pensively followed the lorry with her eyes. The cloud of dust in its wake was far away in the steppe.... Now it turned, vanishing behind the green wall of the forest shelter belt.

Although he was out of sight Savva was not out of Zoya's mind. Her girlish imagination painted a vivid portrait of him: Savva stepping lightly by Palivoda's side across the furrows, and the swallows flirting with him. Then night fell and Savva was in another team, perhaps Oksana's, stretched out under a tractor, working skilfully, spectacularly, his face lit up by the torches.

When would he be back? If by evening, he would probably come out into the yard with his full-throated concertina.... But it all depended on her, Zoya, whether he would return or not. Perhaps she would have to contact him out there in the steppe and send him from Palivoda's to another team, order him to get there as quickly as possible without returning to the MTS.

And she would have to do it, in spite of everything.

He had behaved in a strange way. "Fine little bride... for someone!"

For someone, dear Savva? I would rather it were you!

The heat was sweltering and the steppe simmered in the blinding haze.

IV

Rainless days came and went. Rain had fallen in the vicinity, but it missed the Solonchany MTS.

Karp Vasilievich came home looking gloomier every day. Usually he wore his cap on the back of his head, his face shining, but now it was pulled down over his eyes and was covered with a layer of dust—letters could be traced on it.

Zoya had heard her father upbraiding a visiting assistant professor from the institute of mechanization.

"Why are you wasting time on trifles?" he roared. "Why don't you break the clouds for us. It's about time!"

The assistant professor, who was objecting, kept repeating something.

"That's not true, the time *is* ripe!" her father boomed back. "It is possible and imperative to control the movement of air currents.... How much longer shall we have to put up with this anarchy in nature?"

Savva's concertina was silent in the evenings. If he hadn't been sent anywhere he would come to the office looking glum, nervy and unapproachable. He would station himself in the doorway, lean against the door and

from this vantage point stare at the barometer on the wall between the windows.

"Take it down!" he would rumble threateningly. "Or I'll smash it against your heads!"

The instrument behaved disgracefully. While everything was wilting under the scorching sun, the barometer indicated rain three days in succession.

All took the general distress to heart, each in his own way.

Throwing open the radio-room window, Zoya peered into the steppe but saw nothing encouraging. Things were getting worse. The steppe had lost its gay colours. Faded, copper-coloured patches replaced its verdure. The air was dry and there was no dew, not even at dawn.

It was not the sun alone, the entire sky radiated heat. Wilting, losing its blue, it broiled overhead—heavy, bleak, remorseless. Along the edge of its enormous dome hovered dirt-coloured walls of dust, forerunners of distant, ominous storms.

The tractor-drivers spoke to Zoya listlessly from their trailers. She sat amid her equipment, among the dust-covered flowers and books that she had flung away without reading, sat alert, as though expecting something any moment. At times she thought she heard the distant growl of thunder, and darted to the window. But the horizon, as before, was revoltingly bare.

When contacting any of the teams the first thing she did was to ask about the wheat. This did not surprise anyone. The little MTS radio-operator sitting in her tiny booth was not paid by work-days, she neither ploughed nor sowed, but.... The tractor-drivers always took her questions seriously, although they knew she would not use their information in any bulletin.

The news was cheerless.

"The soil is cracking in places," they told her from one end.

"The tractors are sick of it, you can almost hear them groaning," others said.

Time and again the outlying teams contacted Zoya themselves, wanting to know if the sky was overcast anywhere, whether clouds had appeared over the MTS? What could she say to them? Had she been able, she would have driven a cloud to them herself, with its life-giving moisture.

Oksana's team worked in one of the more remote collective farms. They demanded meteorological reports morning and evening.

Their demand was voiced in a sharp, insistent, irritated tone.

V

Father, who had just returned from a meeting of the District Party Committee, was having his evening meal. Zoya stood by the open window. The stars on the horizon winked and glimmered as though they were alive. The pale white of flowering acacias spread under the window. The air was saturated with their fragrance.

They had been planted by her mother.... Zoya wondered why father had not married a second time. His temples were greying, and during the past few days his shoulders seemed to have drooped.

Their house was large and roomy, but few voices were heard in it. It had a shelf of books, a piano and there were bunches of dry wheat stalks on the walls. The purple silk of the MTS challenge banners flashed in the corner: one from the Ministry of Agriculture, another from the Central Council of Trade Unions, and a third—awarded by the Regional Executive Committee during the evacuation. They should have been housed in the club, but the club-house wasn't ready yet, so the manager kept them at home for the time being. The banners he kept at home, while his personal correspondence was filed in the of-

fice, alongside official documents, yellowed letters from the front, letters from numerous trainees of the Solonchany MTS. "Dear Karp Vasilievich!", "our MTS," "our people," "our work"... so they ran; how could he draw a line between personal and official, how to separate his from what was no less his? And in any case why should he separate them?

Father had not finished his meal when the chief agronomist—portly, pink-cheeked, and nicknamed the Mother-Heroine—burst into the room. He qualified for the soubriquet when he appeared at a celebration, having had one over the eight, with his wife's medal* on his chest among his own. The good-humoured agronomist responded to his nickname willingly.

"Didn't I tell you, Karp Vasilievich," he said loudly, seating himself at the table, "to stop worrying about Zoya and find her a stepmother. You wouldn't listen, and now you have nothing but curd and dumplings for dinner."

"I'd hardly have these if there was a stepmother around," Karp Vasilievich intervened for his daughter, and, changing the subject, told the agronomist that a consignment of new tractors was due soon.

"Finding drivers for them won't be an easy matter," the agronomist replied anxiously. "We teach people to drive, train them—and all for someone else."

"Don't grumble," Karp Vasilievich interrupted, "wait till you hear the rest, Filip Zakharich. I've been told that we shall have to transfer some of our drivers to the forest shelter-belt station."

The agronomist clasped his hands in dismay:

"When?"

* Mothers of ten and more children are distinguished with the Mother-Heroine medal.—*Tr.*

"Soon," the manager replied, "it's got to be done quickly."

Zoya listened intently to the conversation. She was by no means indifferent to the news. A pity to see drivers go, but the station needed people too. Who would be transferred, she wondered. The agronomist had his own point of view on that:

"Let them have as much trouble with the drivers as we've had!"

"No," was Karp Vasilievich's calm reply, "we'll send them the best we have. The very best!"

"Do you really mean that, Karp Vasilievich?"

"Absolutely. We mustn't lose any time, let's decide now."

Zoya heard her father name the drivers, and he actually named the cream. Maybe he would include Oksana Boyko? Did Zoya want him to name her? Naturally. If Oksana were transferred to the forest station, Savva Grek would forget her soon enough and take notice of others.

But father had not named Oksana, not yet. He was probably deliberating the matter that very moment, for they were discussing her No. 8 team.

But he did not put Oksana's name on the list.

Zoya, to her disappointment, heard her father name another driver from Oksana's team.

VI

Next day Oksana came tearing into the MTS on a motor-cycle. She barged into the office like a gust of wind and demanded an interview with the manager. He was not in so she turned her fury on the chief agronomist:

"What d'you think you're doing? D'you want to ruin my team, taking my best drivers?"

"Put it in the singular," said the agronomist affably. "We are taking one."

"But why Oprishko of all people?" Oksana stormed.

"And why not Oprishko? Do you know where he is going? He'll work in the shelter-belt station."

"That's not our concern!" Oksana parried.

"But it *is* our concern, Comrade Boyko, it's a matter of the common weal."

Zoya, who heard every word, smiled at Mother-Heroine using the very arguments against Oksana that father had used against him the night before.

In the corridor a little later Zoya met Oksana. Her hand was smeared in lubricating oil so she offered her plump, sun-tanned elbow instead. Concealing her injury, Zoya had no choice but to shake it.

"Why did she do that?" Zoya thought bitterly, later on. "To show me up as a ninny? But all the women cannot be like her. Maybe I, too, want to put on goggles, and tear across the fields like the wind, or tackle the agronomist as she did today? But everyone can't have her temper, and, after all, someone has to work in the radio-room. She sneers at my sandals and braided hair, no doubt, and at my soft hands. But am I to blame for that? Is it wrong for me to have a liking for Savva Grek?"

When Oksana left, the office-girls teased Zoya laughingly:

"Your future stepmother is as hot as pepper!"

"What makes you think she'll be my stepmother?"

"What, pretending you don't know? Why she's pining away for Karp Vasilievich."

Pining away! And those overalls full of her, ready to burst along the seams, Zoya thought.

"Poppycock!" she said aloud. "Our Savva seems to be...."

But they interrupted her: "Savva's drawing a blank with her.... He hasn't a chance!"

"But he's trying!" Zoya thought with pain, "even the girls say so. And if he is, he'll get what he's after!"

It seemed to Zoya that everyone looked at the mechanic through her eyes, that he was as irresistible to the others as he was to her.

The girls were joking, no doubt, when they said Oksana was "pining away." And what if this were really the case? Would she not be better as a stepmother than....

She was Zoya's rival, and a rival she would remain.

VII

Sometimes the radio brought strange voices to Zoya's radio-room, voices that also asked about rain. This did not surprise her, for every year more and more of the MTS's in the south were equipped with radio.

One voice affected her more than all the others. If she had heard call signs from Mars she would probably have been less excited than when she heard that voice. It was a happy, intimate voice. It sounded as though it were at Zoya's side, and even startled her. Twice in succession this unknown voice repeated joyfully:

"Do you see the cloud?"

"Do you see the cloud?"

And then the voice faded out and was lost. The stunned girl looked out of the window, searching the sky in vain for the mysterious cloud. "He wasn't calling me!" she realized at last. "He was calling somebody else, I logged him by accident. But what a fine, pleasant voice.... Just like Savva's!"

More than once that day she caught herself longing for that strange youthful voice again, the voice that reported the cloud: where was it, whence to expect it?

But the radio was silent.

"Who could it have been?" Zoya asked herself. "Maybe a pilot of some aircraft? Maybe he was flying at a high altitude and saw rain clouds coming our way. . . ."

But the sun blazed as before. It seemed as if the wheat was clinging on to life with failing strength under its scorching rays. An unbearable sight!

Zoya told the girls in the office about the mysterious voice and they were bursting with curiosity.

"Who d'you think it was?" they chorused.

Zoya smiled:

"A friend."

She did not tell them that to her the voice sounded like Savva's. The girls kept nagging her:

"You're keeping something from us, Zoya. Come on, tell us: Who are those friends of yours? Where are they?"

"Everywhere," Zoya replied seriously, making a circular motion with her hand.

Then in the afternoon came the long-awaited rain.

A barely visible strip of dark-blue cloud appeared slowly from beyond the horizon. The parched steppe grew still, as though waiting for it with bated breath. The strip, meanwhile, stretched upwards, becoming wider and gradually turning into a cloud, a dark-blue mountain chain that soon covered a large segment of the sky.

A sheet of flame slashed this mountain chain from top to bottom. Thunder boomed. The fields breathed a sigh of relief and there was joy everywhere.

The steppe came to life. While the thunderclouds gathered in the heavens, while everything up there rolled and heaved, little whirlwind flocks rolled over the wheatfields, across the darkening steppe; the green walls of the forest shelter belt grew turbulent and birds flew about in disturbed flight.

The acacias by the office-building reacted with a tender rustling.

Karp Vasilievich, looking years younger, stood in the porch, cap in hand and gazing upwards as if expecting a long-awaited guest.

Zoya was warbling a gay tune in the radio-room. No sooner had the strip of cloud appeared on the horizon than she rushed to the map spotted with pin-sized red flags. There she had all the work-teams before her as on the palm of her hand. Looking at them excitedly, Zoya tried to decide which of them had already seen the cloud. Over there, she reckoned, the first glad shadows were floating above the fields, running ahead of the rain, whilst there, a little farther, the sun was still blazing, and the people out in the fields were as yet unaware of the joy that had gripped the MTS: its workers, its chiefs, and Zoya, the radio-operator.

The glad tidings must reach all ears!

Zoya contacted the teams that still sweated in the scorching heat: "Have you seen the cloud?"

"Have you seen the cloud?" she warbled like a lark. With childish generosity Zoya was passing on the good news and felt all the happier for the giving.

The thunder and lightning drew nearer. A grey cloud heavily laden with moisture descended on the steppe, and bright sheets of rain spread to the horizon. Nearer and nearer.... The smell of hot dust now turning into mud came from the highway. The first large drops fell with a muffled ring, a quiver ran through the greenery beneath her window, and the enchanting music of raindrops reached her. It was a refreshing May downpour, of which it is said that it is gold dropping from the heavens.

Long had they waited for it, and somewhere in Zoya's boundless fields her innumerable friends were still waiting.... She hastened to let them know that it had come.

But she hesitated to contact Oksana Boyko. Her rival had caused her much pain, did she deserve to be told?

"Yes, yes!" Zoya's heart prompted. She contacted Oksana and sang out to the most distant trailer in the steppe: "Oksana, Oksana, d'you hear, d'you see?... Rain is coming your way!"

Oksana replied gratefully that she had seen it.

Zoya had no idea how pretty she was in her happiness. The excitement lent colour to her, beautified her as generously as a mother. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks were aflame. Drenched to the bone, Savva Grek was looking in through the window, staring as if seeing the girl for the first time. He had been running past and sought shelter from the downpour near the office. He was on the point of continuing his journey, but the sight of her rooted him to the spot.

"Skylark! I've never seen you so pretty as you are now!"

Zoya started, she raised her eyes and smiled at Savva.

The steppe was hidden behind the curtain of rain, puddles gleamed on the highway, the soil drank greedily of the life-giving moisture. The wheat picked up noticeably, as though swelling with thick, green juice.

And the raindrops pattered and pattered....

THE ROAD BEYOND THE CLOUDS

It lies over there, high up in the hills, in the realm of rocks and forests....

Barely visible in the green thicket on the stony slope stands the forester's cabin with the slender radio-mast. A path winds downwards from the cabin to the stream. A bare-footed dark girl of about ten runs down the path every morning, springing lightly from rock to rock, water-jug in her hand and smiling at the mountains, at the sky and at the sun!

This is Natela, little mistress of the forester's cabin.

The jug gleams in her sun-tanned slender hand, warm stones stir under her feet....

Down below, the stream murmurs on its way to the valley. Ever since she can remember, Natela has heard it gurgle. Gentle and as sweet as a lullaby it sings her to sleep in the evenings, and wakens her at sunrise, intertwining softly with the enchantment of her girlish dreams, with that wonderful half-awake morning dream-world when you are not quite sure: is it the plash of the stream, or the rain beating against the window?

The nearer the stream, the louder the murmur—it almost rings out a welcome to the girl, as if cheered by her visit, as if happy at the chance of having a word with her.

"Greetings, little stream!"

The stream smiles back at her with the sparkle of its swift current, with the lively fringes of the snow-white foam on the pool by the waterfall.

The rocks gleam in the green velvet of moss, lilies of foam open in the pool and glisten in the sun.... The stream knows that Natela likes to play with it in the mornings. There she is, squatting on a stone, dipping her fingers into the clear, cold current, caressing a wavelet, washing herself, squealing with delight at the ticklish ice-cold mountain water. Then, like a kitten she warms herself in the sun, braiding her moist jet-black plaits. The tireless stream will keep up conversation with her all the morning, she has no one else to talk with during the long summer holidays. Father is on his rounds, striding over the rocks high up near the sky, rifle over his shoulder.... In his absence Natela is mistress of all she surveys—the log cabin, the crystal stream and the forest-clad hills surrounding the hollow on all sides. Natela has no fears, she is used to the place. Every shrub is familiar, every spring flows amiably from under the rocks.... Numerous streamlets nestle in the shady ravines in the hollow; they all sing differently, and Natela can tell which is which by tasting the water.

This mighty torrent, which has its source high up, somewhere beyond the clouds, gathers to itself the waters of numerous springs and rivulets.

Natela has never been up there, although to her the clouds are not so distant and unattainable as they appear to the children of the valleys and plains. She can see the life of the clouds with her naked eye. Their restive route is almost on a level with the forester's cabin. In bad weather the clouds billow thickly over the hollow, envelop the rocks in moisture-laden grey curls and reach to the tops of the pines on the slopes. The winds that always roam in the hills tear at them relentlessly, ripping them up and scattering them in all directions.

"Father, take me up there, right up to the pass," Natela pleaded. "I want to see the place where cloud and wind meet. . . ."

And father has promised to cut a path up there in time, and lead her to it. Meanwhile, Natela whiles away the bad weather in the cabin, where it is dark at noonday when the swirling clouds come down to the windows, and when the thunder shakes the log walls that are hung from corner to corner with golden rings—samples of timber. The formidable elements run wild in the hills, the age-old trees creak over Natela's head, and the slender, childish hand stretches to switch off the radio, which is filled with noises—the accompaniment to the terrible battle raging outside in the vicinity of the pass.

There is no road from here to the pass. In fact, there are no roads from here to anywhere, just a narrow, barely visible path following the stream all the way to the distant valley where Uncle Levan and Aunt Ethery live. During the school term Natela lives there too, at Uncle Levan's, and only makes rare visits to her father on horseback or donkey. That is the only means of getting to this land directly under the skies. It takes a day to descend to the valley, and two to ascend. It would have been immeasurably faster by automobile, but what automobile could drive through the hills along the goat path, along the narrow ledge bordering a precipice where even a donkey chances peril?

Travellers are rarely seen here. Uncle Levan comes occasionally, loaded with packages; sometimes a hunter, or strangers in military uniform, measuring the mountains with instruments. Young Pioneers from the capital climbed up here the summer before, with knapsacks on their backs and staves in their hands. They collected samples of minerals in the hills and rare herbs, and Natela helped them heart and soul.

On another occasion a party of geologists pitched their green tent by the stream. They stayed longer. They were headed by Nina Fedorovna, who soon became friendly with Natela and invited her to sleep in the tent. Nina Fedorovna had a particular interest in mountain springs, and the forester's girl led her from one spring to another, acquainting her with all the lore of her mountain kingdom. The geologists were deeply impressed by the Stag Spring. When she was returning to the valley, Nina Fedorovna filled a bottle with its water and even stuck a label on it and put it away in her knapsack just as if it were a treasure-trove.

Then they returned to the valley—the Pioneers with their collections and the geologists with their samples.... Natela thinks of them often. Perhaps they will come again this summer, maybe they are on their way now, somewhere along the path by the stream. But no one comes, no human voices are heard among the hills.... Only the stream whispers its monotonous legend.

The sun shines out of the blue, the hills are clad in greenery, the water exhales the freshness of the mountains. It is wonderful here, but it is better down in the valley. This mountain stream broadens out into a river there, flowing between the luscious abundance of collective-farm orchards and vineyards....

Laughter and gaiety reign in the vineyards, boys and girls bathe in the river.... The streets are noisy after sundown, films are shown at the clubs.... If only Natela had a little aeroplane, she could go there once in a while with her father. Cliffs are no obstacle to an aeroplane, bad roads mean nothing to it, its route lies through the limitless sky.

When Natela gets homesick and begins to think of her aunt and uncle, of her teachers and classmates, she sends them a reminder of herself. She has several ways of doing this. She floats a paper-boat down the stream, and if

there is no paper at hand, she sends live green messages to the valley. The kind stream is a reliable assistant. She can throw a bunch of mountain blackberries or rhododendron into its waters:

"Sail off!"

The current picks up the girl's message, rushes it down, manoeuvring deftly between the rocks like a merry courier.... Neither blackberries nor rhododendron grow down there on the collective-farm fields, and when the children fish them out of the water they know at once that they are from Natela.

"From Natela, who lives up there under the clouds!"

* * *

A distant roar, like that of thunder, awakened Natela one morning. But the sky was clear, and, moreover, the noise came from the gorge, down among the cliffs, and not from the pass above, where the thunder lives throughout the summer.

What could it have been?

Running to the nearest rock Natela looked down attentively: there wasn't a cloud in sight, not a wisp of smoke. The hills gleamed serenely, the forests drowsed in the sun, desolate and lonely. Only the murmuring of the stream broke the primeval silence of the hills.

Perhaps it was her fancy? Or maybe a rock had broken loose?

But soon another and louder rumble came from the depths of the gorge.

"Father!" Natela called in alarm, when she heard his familiar whistle. "Did you hear that noise, Father? It was like thunder!"

Father appeared from behind the trees in his felt mountaineer's hat, his black shirt unbuttoned and his rifle on his shoulder. Weary after his long tramp, he stepped

slowly from stone to stone, a smile spreading on his unshaven, perspiring face.

"Were you scared, Natela?"

"No. But it's very strange.... Out of the clear blue sky..." she said.

"It is good thunder, daughter.... They're quarrying, preparing material for making a road."

A road! Natela clapped her hands with joy and rushed into her father's embrace.

"A real, wide road, Father? And automobiles will drive up here, too?"

"Here, and even higher, they'll go over the pass," he answered.

"What's on the other side of the pass?" she asked.

"Another pass, much higher than ours.... Then more valleys and towns," he told her.

Unknown valleys and towns, and an open road for Natela to travel by! Let them keep up the thunder, let it growl thick and fast!

The roars grew louder as the days went by, rolling through the hills with a powerful, triumphant echo. Every explosion was a thrill for Natela: the road was coming nearer!

Then, at last, came the long-awaited day: the road-builders had reached the hollow. They were young, suntanned, covered from head to foot with the grey dust of the conquered rocks. They looked like front-line soldiers, armed with picks instead of guns, and powerful, rumbling machines instead of horses. A lively babble of human voices filled the hollow, as though the youth of the country had come here to build this road for Natela.

At nightfall the builders pitched their tents by the stream, threw off their salty, sweat-soaked shirts, and washed themselves. Natela did what she could for them. Flushing happily, she showed them the best stones to

wash on, gathered wood for their camp-fire, showed them the way to her springs for drinking water.

"Take some of this... this is the sweetest water!"

Then, gay and excited, she squatted amid the builders gathered round the camp-fire, and an elderly, blond engineer spoke to her.

"Tell us, Natela," he asked smiling, "how did you discover the Stag Springs?"

The girl blushed.

"I didn't discover them.... It was the stag, and I just noticed.... The stag was ill, or wounded maybe. When he and I met for the first time by the spring, he could hardly keep on his legs.... He often came down to his spring and drank, and drank.... I guessed that it was a special kind of water, because he drank only from this spring, never from any of the others...."

"And was he cured?" the engineer asked.

"Oh, yes.... He got livelier with every day. When I saw him for the last time he darted away and disappeared in a flash."

"Do you know, little one, what they've named the water from this spring?"

"No."

"They've named it 'Natela'," he said.

"But why 'Natela'?"

"The geologists gave it that name in your honour. You discovered it, you showed them where the stag drank.... If it hadn't been for your discovery there wouldn't be a road here.... A mineral-water plant will shortly be built here, and 'Natela' water sent all over the country!"

This brought the blood to her face. She was confused, even a bit frightened that her little discovery had in some way influenced the fate of the road. She had never suspected that by showing her sparkling, bubbling springs to the geologists she would cause so much bother to unknown people.... But it was good to know that the water

from the Stag Spring would go to all ends of the country bringing people health and strength, so they wouldn't die as young as her mother.... Natela remembered her mother faintly, as if through a dim haze of clouds.... What a pity she knew nothing of this healing water then. It would have saved her mother, perhaps, and mother would be with her now.... Let her spring be a boon to the people, let them all be healthy and strong like the stag....

"Are you building the road just to the spring?" Natela asked curiously, throwing sticks into the fire. "Isn't it going any farther?"

"We'll take it farther," the engineer replied, looking at the hills thoughtfully. "We're expected beyond those hills by other little girls like you with their discoveries."

"Think you've climbed higher than the others, do you?" a freckled lad in an embroidered scull-cap turned to Natela. "There are villages up there, that even a bird can't reach... What about them? They've had goats' paths before, but life is widening these days, it wants wide roads...."

"What air, what sun they have there!" one of the builders murmured with delight, a real mountaineer by the looks of him. "Shining brightly all the time! We'll have Pioneer camps there."

"We'll build a high-altitude resort for miners up there..." another added.

Enraptured, Natela listened to the builders and her shining eyes grew wider and wider. The road appeared to her as a miracle, a road of happiness. It would change life in these parts, turn this wild, remote outpost into a thriving community.... They needed this highway urgently. The collective farmers would take the golden fruits of their orchards over it, lorries would carry the healing "Natela" water to all parts of the country, and

high above the mist-enshrouded heights, in the realm of eternal sunshine, they would build a high-altitude resort for miners....

"What name will you give the resort?" she asked.

The builders exchanged quick glances.

"We'll call it 'Temple of the Sun.' D'you like that?"

Natela smiled bashfully:

"'Temple of the Sun'.... I think it's a wonderful name."

Then she spoke again:

"Father says that far away beyond the passes there are more valleys and towns."

"Valleys gay with flowers and white seaside cities.... And when you grow up, Natela, you'll travel along our road to go to college there.... Will you think of us then?"

The girl became thoughtful.

"Yes, I shall...."

The evening mist floated over the stream, twilight descended on the rocks. Father came to the camp-fire, smart, shaven, wearing his burnished army medals and carrying a wineskin under his arm. For him the arrival of the builders was a special event. He seemed to feel a soldier again in their midst. Although some were blond, and some even very fair alongside the swarthy southern mountaineers, although he knew by their accents and jokes that not all of them by far had grown up in the hills, yet when they spoke of Stalingrad or the Ukrainian and Byelorussian fronts of the Great Patriotic War they understood each other perfectly.

They ate by the fire. The full moon coming up over the pass poured its serene, white light into the hollow. Huge shadows appeared among the cliffs. The mist over the stream turned silver, the heavy machines gleamed dully in the road and the mineral spangles glistened in the tall rocks.

The camp-fire crackled; and a cool evening freshness drifted from the stream.

"Somehow the moon is whiter in these hills," the engineer whispered dreamily, leaning back against a granite rock. "It is clear from here that the moon is a ball, a lifeless planet.... And it's only a stone's throw away...."

The good-humoured, lumbering mechanic in overalls emptied his glass at one go and waved it gaily over his head:

"What a pity, there's nothing left, otherwise I'd splash it right into the moon's face!"

And handing his glass to a neighbour, the mechanic broke into a song with a powerful baritone voice, a song Natela had never heard before. It entered the child's open heart easily and freely. The others joined in the refrain and it grew and spread. Natela listened with excitement, oblivious to everything....

The song flowed freely, intertwining with the melodious murmuring of the stream. The hills were still, veiled in the moonlight haze, enchanted by the beauty of the wide, open, never-seen steppes, which the song described....

Then a strong hand, very much like the hand of her father, stroked Natela lightly, and the girl heard a gentle, thoughtful voice by her ear, addressing her father:

"Your daughter's a fine girl, Sergeant.... I've got a little imp just like her at home.... I had a letter from her yesterday...."

"My only mistress," the father replied with a sad pride. "But she's lonely here, the summer holidays seem eternal to her...."

"She'll not be lonely any more.... There'll be communication with the valley...." Then he turned to Natela: "We'll take you for a ride tomorrow along the new road. What do you say to that?"

Natela looked at her father with burning eyes: would he give her permission?

"Why not! Pay Uncle Levan a visit...."

In a car along the new road! The camp-fire songs sounded even more wonderful after that, and the hills, streaked in moonlight, and the stony gleam of the highway winding down like a ledge into the mysterious darkness of the cliffs....

* * *

Natela went for a day, but she stayed in the valley much longer. Aunt Ethery would not let her go: thunderstorms raged in the hills, the summer downpours, terrifying at this time of the year, came down unceasingly. The turgid, roaring stream rushed its muddy waters to the valley, carrying uprooted trees and clay. Clouds billowed day after day above the mountains, lightning cut the sky, and in the valley the windows trembled at the peals of muffled alpine thunder. Only when the clouds had dispersed and the sun shone again, did Uncle Levan take Natela out on the road and help her into a passing lorry.

The driver knew Natela and greeted her cheerfully, telling her all that had occurred in her absence.

"Your father is hale and hearty, he's seen worse thunderstorms," the driver said, "but the road suffered in places. It's strewn with boulders, and the bridge at the turn was swept away.... But everything has been restored now."

Natela could see for herself. Where the stream narrowed, the waterfalls were piled with tree-trunks and boulders, and stones displaced from the hill-sides were scattered along the road. The sinewy driver had to jump down every few minutes to edge the big ones to the side of the road and then send them hurtling over the precipice.

. "What did you do during the rain-storm?" the girl asked. "Did you shelter in shacks?"

"No, we didn't spend much time in the shacks," the driver smiled mysteriously.

When they reached their destination, Natela gasped: not a single tent remained by the stream! There was no sign of the machines. The completed highway twined round the cliff and disappeared somewhere in the hills beyond the pass, freshly washed by the showers, and shrouded in the flimsy mist of scattering clouds.

"Farewell, citizen," the driver joked, opening the door for Natela. "That's as far as your ticket takes you."

"And ... and where ... are your comrades?" Natela mumbled in astonishment.

"Over there," the driver motioned beyond the pass. "Want me to take your regards to them? They often talk about you, they want to write to you...."

Natela remained by the roadside with the basket in her hand, happy and confused. There was no one to be seen. They had all gone up there. If only her voice would reach them she would send her love across the mountains, her sincere gratitude for the highway, left to her by the builders as a present!

"Give them my regards," she murmured excitedly, with a touch of sorrow. "My very best wishes to all of them.... And tell them to write...."

"Without fail," the driver smiled good-bye. "They know the address."

The lorry rolled out of sight behind the cliff. Only the mountains remained, clad in greenery after the showers; and the sky—with a rare, unusual blue, and the new highway, cut in the rocks.

Day followed day. But a sense of something new imbued the forester's daughter. The mountains seemed to have retreated, and the world appeared broader. Not the

murmuring of the stream, but the cheerful toot of automobiles wakened her now in the mornings.

Natela's cherished aspirations were closely linked with the powerful rumbling of the road in construction. The rumbling had changed its location: only recently it had resounded below the forester's cabin, now it echoed higher up in the hills, higher and still higher.

The road-builders had not forgotten their young friend. When Natela washed in the stream, the current often brought her greetings from beyond the clouds.... Wonderful greetings! Now it was a branch of rhododendron, now a thick sheaf of wonderful grasses and alpine flowers that she had never seen before, flowers that grew only there, high up in the mountains, in the kingdom of glistening snowcaps.

MIKITA BRATUS

It is a glorious morning which even the dead would have regretted missing had they but known. The snows are fast disappearing, the brooks are babbling and the mud is rapidly drying. The sky looks younger and its blue is the blue of spring.

My orchard is bare as yet, but the buds are full of juice and I can see they will burst open any minute.

"Good morning," I say to the orchard, doffing my hat civilly.

This is a ceremony that I go through every morning, bowing and raising my rabbit-skin hat with the ear-flaps tied together at the back.

The girls laugh: "What an actor you are, Mikita Ivanovich!" I suppose they think that I've become eccentric in my old age.

"Chatterboxes," I reply, "what are you laughing at? Without this there wouldn't be any fruit."

"What? Without your good morning?" they ask, grinning.

"Exactly," I explain. "When I bow to one of the trees I can see at a glance if the worm has eaten into it, or if the cold has affected the buds, and whether the tree needs first aid."

The garden is peaceful and quiet, but you should see the suppleness of these sturdy trees when the wind blows! But today there is no wind and each tree seems

to be day-dreaming, gleaming in the sunshine, caressing me with its pliant and moist limbs. It stretches its arms to me like a loving child to a doting parent, and rightly so, for I've given twenty years of my life to this garden—the energy I've spent on it would be good for a life of two hundred years.

We are opening the trenches today. Covered with frames and matting they have spent the winter under a layer of earth. The trenches are deep and long, and their adobe walls are neatly whitewashed. It is in this evergreen, underground subtropical grove that we grow our lemons.

One gardener always understands another, and only a gardener can appreciate what I feel this moment, as I raise the first frame. Have the lemons withstood the winter? Has our dream come true, or must we begin all over again? My lemons have spent the winter unwatered, in pitch darkness beneath a thick layer of snow. Even for a human being, to say nothing of a tender plant, this long night would be a difficult matter. It's been a night of many months, every bit as long as the polar night. I must confess that I peeped in a few times during thaws, just to give the lemons a little light, but that was different.

My heart pounds as I raise the frame, and the girls—my tireless, hard-working pupils and helpers—crowd round, holding their breath.

Would we have a bit of the subtropics, or not?

I remove the frame as gravely as if it were the door to the morrow. The sunbeams leap in ahead of me, streaming along the white subterranean grove and lighting up the long row of our little southerners.

"They've come through!" somebody shouted.

We jump down into the trench and examine the leaves. They are somewhat withered, but they haven't dropped off—they're alive. I can sense their living pulse,

and that's all that matters. The soil under the lemons has hardened: they've sucked up all the moisture. But now we'll water them, they'll have all the water they want, all the fresh air, all the sunlight, all the warmth. Many splendid sunny days await them.

"There you are! Didn't I tell you, girls, that we can grow any kind of tree here—except one kind!"

"What is that?"

"The one that isn't planted!"

The girls have every reason to be as happy as larks. Did they not do equally as much as I? Are not their hands as callous as mine from digging these trenches?

They remove the earth and frames, chattering the while. "Let's get that spindle-legged Morganist* over here and tell him a thing or two:—Down you go, unbeliever, down into the trench and see for yourself, our lemons have survived!" They are referring to Harlampy Davidovich Ziuza, our book-keeper. Last year at a meeting of the collective-farm board, he spoke against my plan for growing lemons.

"We respect you deeply, Mikita Ivanovich," Ziuza said. "Our Chervony Zaporozhets is a millionaire collective farm thanks to your cherries and apples. Scientists visit you in their motor-cars, the newspapers describe you as a militant Michurinist, as a prodigy. No denying that! But what you are proposing now just won't do! This is not the Crimea, nor is it Odessa. The subtropics are far away. This is the Dnieper Region, the extreme north of the Taurida lands. We're not expected to grow lemons; otherwise they'd be included in our production plan. So why rush ahead of our southern neighbours? Our orchards are not poor. Do we not grow all the fruit we need? Let others play about with lemons,

* Morganist—follower of Morgan's reactionary biological theories.—*Tr.*

we'll wait and see. If they are successful, we shall be only too glad to learn from them and follow in their footsteps. It's not that I object to the idea of remaking nature! I myself had an interest in lemons, comrades—tried raising one at home in a tub. It had everything it needed—except tea and candy. But when winter came it shed its leaves, and died. Why? Simply because this isn't the zone for lemons."

"You've opened your mouth and put your foot into it, Comrade Ziuza," I came back at him. "You are like the sage that fusses about on the riverbank looking for a bridge, while the fool wades across. You may remember that there were sceptics in those days, who said wine-growing had no chance in our climate. They shouted at me from all the roof-tops when I planted the first bushes. But where are they now? I could bathe them in the wine we get from our new frost-hardy grapes!"

"Drown them in it, I'd say," Comrade Meleshko, our chairman, put in, "but that would be a waste of good wine."

"Take cotton growing," I continued, "when we began growing it in the southern Ukraine, they roared at us, 'This isn't the zone for cotton! It won't ripen! The bolls won't open before the frost sets in!'... Surely, you haven't forgotten, Comrade Ziuza?"

"That was deliberate," Ziuza retorted, fidgeting in his chair, "that was different!"

"Certainly," I said, "but since then you have worn out more than one pair of trousers made of Golopristan or Melitopol cotton—the cotton that they said had no chance!"

"That was different," he repeated.

"No, it wasn't different," I said.

Then he resorted to theory. He threw in all the aces he had about the average temperature, and about the number of sunny days the lemon needed to ripen. He

thought he had me up against the wall and chortled: "The figures don't tally, do they? The number of sunny days needed by them is more than what they can get in our climate, isn't it?"

"If the numbers tallied," I retorted, "there'd be no need to force an open door and we'd have had lemons long ago all over the Ukraine."

"Have we voted in a new climate?" he chaffed. "What'll we do with our cold winters? Have you a new frost-hardy variety of lemon, perhaps? We'd vote with both hands for that!—But you want to raise the tender southern variety, and that needs special conditions. Where, Comrade Bratus, will you get it all the sunny days?"

He ended on a note of triumph and sat down confidently. I was about to swallow Ziuza—oculars, beak and all—when a chorus of voices came from the open door:

"We'll heat them ourselves!"

"We'll heat them!"

My girls, my Komsomol members, had come to my rescue. Nearly all of my gardening team was there, at the door.

"You'd make it hot for them, no doubt," the chairman said dubiously. I noticed that he kept looking at Lydia Tarasovna, waiting for her to speak.

Lydia Tarasovna Bashtova, an agronomist, is our Party organizer and her opinion carries a lot of weight, even with Meleshko. She is a woman of rare self-control, and never makes hasty conclusions.

"Tell us more about your plan," she said to me quietly.

I did. And everybody listened in silence. Only Ziuza was busy adding and subtracting on his abacus. And when I had finished he took the floor again.

"If we calculate the work-days required in terms of money," he announced, "it'll work out at a round five-figure sum, something like ten thousand rubles. How

many lemons can you buy on the market for ten thousand, Comrade Bratus?"

"Enough to last us three years," Meleshko cut in, evidently disconcerted by Ziuza's four zeroes. And were we to buy them wholesale, we'd get even more!"

"Moreover," Ziuza added readily, "there is no risk involved."

Then he continued: "Our Chervony Zaporozhets is not a research institute, and we can't afford ten thousand rubles for experiments."

I was about to reply, but saw my red-cheeked Orishka elbowing her way through the crowd at the door. She wasn't having that! What she says to me at home is nobody's business, but in public she always stands up for me.

"Now listen to me, all of you," Orishka shouted indignantly, "take Ziuza's zeroes with a grain of salt! Don't you remember that the year before last he calculated that the cost of one egg would be a hundred and forty rubles?"

"That was a mistake," Ziuza remonstrated angrily. "About time you dropped it! I've been justly criticized for the egg, and that's more than enough!"

Comrade Meleshko tried to preserve peace.

"Keep to the subject," he demanded, and I had no idea whether he meant Ziuza or Orishka, or both.

Lydia Tarasovna followed the discussion attentively, squinting at the speakers (she has a habit of squinting at people in the same way as one blinks at the sun). Then she took the floor.

"We wouldn't be much good if we threw our rubles to the winds," Lydia Tarasovna began, "but would that be the case with the lemons? What if one of the new frost-hardy Ukrainian varieties were grown right here in our Kavunovka, in our Chervony Zaporozhets? That would be worth far more than money to us, and to the

country. Imagine every collective farm with a lemon-grove! Should the children become ill, the lemons would be good for them.... Is ten thousand too high a price for that? The health of our children comes first! Pardon me for being blunt, Harlampy Davidovich, but you reason like a shopkeeper; a collective farm shopkeeper, perhaps, but a shopkeeper just the same."

Quick to make up his mind, Meleshko looked ominously at his book-keeper.

"Raising an opposition, eh?" he muttered.

Lydia Tarasovna continued:

"You won't look farther than your nose.... But this is a really vital matter.... We want to remake nature, to adapt a subtropical plant. Just think of that, comrades!"

Lydia Tarasovna stood up.

"Lemons in the Ukraine! Who'd have thought it possible?!" she exclaimed, "Off with our hats to it!"

Yes, that's what she said: off with our hats! Why, after that she rose still higher in my esteem. I decided then and there that Lydia Tarasovna would get our first lemon as a reward for her progressive way of thinking.

"What about it, girls?"

"Make yourself clear, Mikita Ivanovich," they answer.

"Shall we let Lydia Tarasovna sample our first lemons?"

"Right you are!" they agree.

"It's a good thing that we see eye to eye."

"And what about Ziuza?" they ask.

"Hm.... Ziuza...."

Ziuza must abide by the rules. If he wants lemons, he must write out an invoice. We're sticklers for the regulations; no sampling for him!

All the frames have been taken up and we break off for lunch. Flushed with their exertions, the girls, as I can plainly see, are bent on mischief. I always manage

them splendidly. A laugh here, a chuckle there, and before you know it the job is done.

They're a pretty lot, these Komsomol girls; pretty even now, and doubly so at harvest-time.... Fellows from the neighbouring Red Banner Mine boasted to me last autumn that they knew the girls from my team in the dark.

"How?" I inquired.

"Easy as pie," they said. "They smell of apples."

What an astounding sense of smell! I can't smell them. Maybe it's because I smell of apples myself. Orishka always tells me that I do (and she smells of warm cow's milk all the year round).

The girls treat me to meat-patties, and I know instantly that they have something up their sleeves.

"What are you up to, busybodies?" I ask, "what do you want from an old man?"

"Why, you're not old, Mikita Ivanovich!" they exclaim in unison. "You could climb to the house-tops without a ladder!"

"That depends on the house-tops," I reply, "it would be a tall order, modern architecture being what it is."

It turns out that I am to tell the girls "something interesting" in honour of this first day of spring.

"What shall I tell you?"

"Tell us about your young days!" they clamour.

Oh, the chatterboxes! The magpies! That's their favourite subject.

"Well, believe it or not, girls," I begin, and tell them about my youth, about my grandfather, and our mulberry-tree—one lonely mulberry-tree in the middle of our yard. At the moment I have a suspicion that it wasn't a mulberry, but a barren tree, it never bore fruit, while all of our Bratus tribe waited and waited for it to blossom.

Every New Year's Eve Grandfather Kalina would go out into the yard bare-footed and shake his axe at the tree. "Bear fruit this summer, or I'll fell you!" he would say.

All of us hoped that the tree would heed his warning. But summer came, and still it remained barren.

The girls never take this story seriously. They laugh. But I don't, for it's the truth, and not in the least funny.

"What an actor you are, Mikita Ivanovich!"

2

The orchard is a living chronicle of our artel. Look at it! One might think that these Shafranny and Golden Reinettes have been here since time immemorial, and that the sycamores and tall poplars have always stood guard against the wind. But not so long ago there were neither garden nor trees.

The village extended to the barren and hilly islet formed by the channels of the Dnieper. There was water in plenty right alongside, but the soil bore nothing but black burrs. There would be a sparse growth in spring and cattle could graze on it until June, but then it fell prey to the scorching steppe wind, which destroyed everything. I would often look at our island in those days: a barren waste turning a desolate yellow beyond the river meadows year after year. A wilderness of sand! But what could I do at the time—even with Orishka at my side?

My hour came when we organized our collective farm. From now on, I said to myself, you'll be able to do what you've always wanted. Now, my boy, we'll move mountains!

I had always wanted to raise frost-hardy plants and do away with sporadic fruit-growing—ticklish problems that still bother my sleep. It has always been a passion with me to play tricks on nature, crossing some of our

local stock. My Pionerka cherries are known, I daresay, throughout southern Ukraine. People came to me for Pionerka saplings, and, anxious to see it blossom everywhere, I gave them all I had.

But I was cramped for space and couldn't do the things that I wanted to. If Orishka stretched herself full-length across our plot, her feet would trespass on our neighbour's patch. My nursery nestled against the side of my cottage—no bigger than the palm of my hand. But people kept coming, and I'd be glad to oblige them, but I never had enough saplings.

I even tried grassland farming, but instantly Orishka was up in arms.

"D'you want alfalfa in your borshch instead of cabbage?" she exclaimed.

But things changed after we set up our collective farm. I made the proposition that we should lay out a large Michurin-type orchard, and my idea was supported by Karp Vasilievich Lisogor—now manager of the Solonchany MTS—he was then secretary of our Party group.

"By all means!" he said.

But where to do so? We could not encroach on our fields, so we decided to lay out the orchard on wasteland.

Three of us—Lisogor, Meleshko, who has headed the collective farm since the very beginning, and I—made a survey of the island.

Burrs and sand got into my shabby shoes as we—the three founders, the three pioneers—walked through the spurge and thistle, standing there like Circassians in black *papakhas.**

Green lizards and yellow-bellied vipers scurried from under our feet. They were legion on the island!

* *Papakha*—a high Caucasian fur hat.—*Tr.*

The scorching east winds had wreaked havoc on the island, which from the green paradise of days of long ago had been turned into a forsaken wilderness.

"Will trees grow here?" Karp Lisogor asked me.

"We'll make them grow," I said, and Meleshko sighed deeply.

I knew that it would take a herculean effort to make a garden of this place. It would mean irrigation, fertilization, and strict agrotechnique. To be brief, it would mean toil and sweat... and much pain. One man wouldn't have an earthly chance, but I was no longer single-handed: I had the collective-farm system to back me. That was why I boldly declared that the orchard would blossom.

With a frown Meleshko crumpled a clod of the sandy soil, and even sniffed it for some reason or other.

"It'll turn our pockets inside out," he growled, "but will it pay in the long run?"

"Let's hope so," Lisogor replied. "It'll mean hardship for a start, but an orchard isn't radish and doesn't yield a profit the day after you plant it. Orchards aren't for short-sighted people. They call for people with nerve and ambition—optimists!"

"Give me your hand, Karp! In the past I have always been just Mikita Bratus from Kavunovka, but now I know what I am—an optimist from top to toe. We'll irrigate the island, there's water enough in the Dnieper. We'll harness science to our chariot, and get machines, and we'll nurse the trees tenderly. Surely, they'll flower and bear fruit."

"Well," Meleshko chimed in, "let's give it a try."

Mind you, when Meleshko says "well" he'll sit through the night like a hobgoblin, if need be, just to make things hum.

"There would be no harm in visiting Comrade Michurin in Kozlov," Lisogor suggested to me. "Go and make

his acquaintance, ask for advice. Take a sample of the soil with you, show it to Michurin; he's bound to have a laboratory. Then you'll know what it lacks. Any objections, Logvin Potapovich?"

"None," Meleshko replied, "and ask Michurin for saplings. Tell him that we need them for our new, model orchard. Don't be bashful, take everything he gives. There's plenty of room on the island."

We shook hands, and, having filled my bag with the island soil, I set out on my visit to Michurin.

People who say that Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin was sour and capricious don't know what they're talking about. Quite the contrary, he was wise, witty and good-humoured!... He couldn't have been like that just with me.

I arrived in Kozlov on a cold, wet day. A warm fire crackled in Michurin's study as I entered, drenched to the skin.

Michurin sat hunched over his desk, writing. He raised his head, taking me in with his shrewd and placid eyes. There was something really venerable in his glance, something human, even youthful, and winning.

"Bratus?... Yes, I've heard of you."

He motioned to a chair on his right.

"Well, now tell me what brought you to me," he said.

His voice was soft, but it sounded like thunder in my ears.

"I've come for advice, and I've brought a sample of soil that I want to show you."

He studied the soil unhurriedly, and finally said: "Excellent, go right ahead with your orchard."

But when I asked him for some of his seedlings, Michurin scolded me (but softened later, and gave me some).

"It's not that I grudge you the seedlings," he said, "but my varieties are chiefly intended for the North. What

use can they be in the Ukraine? What you really need is my method—not my seedlings. Learn to cultivate the soil properly, and take command of nature."

"We'll learn," I promised.

"Keep a close eye on the varieties of popular selection: they contain boundless wealth," he advised.

Meanwhile, the heat in the room made my clothes steam, and Michurin noticed this.

"You need dry clothes," he said, rising from his desk. "You're steaming at the moment, and for all I know, you may start germinating in a minute."

It was embarrassing, causing him all this trouble. I wanted to refuse the dry clothes, but he wouldn't hear of it!... Besides, Meleshko had counselled me not to be bashful.

Michurin invited me to taste some of his frost-hardy hybrids. As I chewed I praised them for all I was worth, but he only grinned.

"Don't exaggerate. I hate flattery. Surely, southern apples taste much better.... But this is quite an achievement for the North, where people had never grown apples before."

As we parted, my mentor laid his hands on my shoulders and said:

"It will be even more difficult for you than it has been for me, Bratus."

"Why?" I asked in surprise.

"In the Ukraine fruit-growing is far more advanced than it is in the North. You have excellent selection there, and it's much easier starting from scratch than improving on what's already almost perfect."

Now I am all for fun and I know a good joke when I hear one. This, no doubt, was one of Michurin's jokes. Both of us knew perfectly well who had the harder time. Needless to say, it was Michurin, because pioneering is always heavy going.

But my own job was no bed of roses. One night the kulaks and their associates would turn mice loose on our island; at another time they'd strip the trees of their bark. And they vilified me on every street-corner. There was a certain wood-fretter from Zhitomir, a real forest-bug that cost me a lot of sleep.... But let's leave him for the time being, and get on with the story of our orchard.

The orchard wasn't planted all at once. At first it was a slice of about seventy-five acres along the rim of the island. A year later, after this had taken root, we girdled the island with another strip totalling one hundred acres. The year after we tackled the hilly part of the island.... Three hundred acres in all!

Our orchard grew, bit by bit, simultaneously with our collective farm, until it reached the top of the hill.

You should see it now, especially in May, when the trees are in blossom!... You walk for a mile in a fairy land of white-and-pink blossoms, then for another mile in a magnificent sea of fragrant floscules; and in August pounds and pounds of grapes hang in heavy bunches from every vine, while the trees bend under the weight of fruit—see that you prop them up! Shafranny apples shine red amid the foliage, and as you look up, Calville apples blaze in the sun, all the way to the top of the trees... After a gust of wind you never know where to put your feet for fear of stepping on the blanket of apples that covers the orchard. Pick up one of them—it smiles at you, pink-cheeked and delicious. You hesitate to put it down and wonder what to do with it. I've watched my gardener friends at it: they pick up an apple, but never throw it down again. I'm always meeting extraordinary people. There was a time when I never met anyone more important than the bailiff, the priest or the deacon; and there was nothing very great or extraordinary about any of these. But nowadays I meet

really famous people. Perhaps it's just luck, or, it may be that it's because there are so many of them in our days, that it is easier to meet them.

The Secretary of the Central Committee paid us a visit a few years ago. I treasure the memory of that day along with my talk with Michurin. The visit took place in May when the orchard was in blossom. Our inquisitive Young Pioneers rushed breathless to the apple-tree section (I always give them access to the orchard so that they can become acquainted with it), and announced:

"Cars! Coming over the bridge!"

No matter how I tried, I could get nothing more out of them, except that the cars were black and shiny.

As I hurried towards the main alley I kept wondering who they could be.

A group of people was coming up the path, towards me. I recognized Comrade Smirnov, Secretary of the District Party Committee, Lydia Tarasovna Bashtova, and the indispensable Meleshko. But they were preceded by a man who was taking a lively interest in the trees—a short, stocky man in a white suit; something like myself in height and figure.

As we drew closer to each other my heart missed a beat from joy! It was the Secretary of the Central Committee!

He looked just as I had seen him in the newspapers,—smiling amiably, as if we were old friends.

"Good day, Comrade Bratus," he said and offered me his hand. "So this is your kingdom?"

"Yes," I replied.

The orchard was in full blossom! I like it at all seasons: in its summer glory, golden autumn and in winter as well, when it is waist-deep in snow: but I like it best in May—words fail to describe it !... To be sure, only the gardener and the bee can match their love for it in spring-

time.... And on this day of the Secretary's visit it seemed to me that never had the orchard bloomed as now. Never had it been so magnificent. Maybe the explanation was the blue cloud on the horizon: the background it formed enhanced the charm of the tree blossom.

Even the tiniest branch was a mass of white and pink blossom. And as for the air, if ever paradise existed, its aroma must have been like that of my orchard. It was so heavenly it could have been poured straight into perfume bottles. Every tree, every crown blazed like an enormous flower-vase made of air, sunlight and the most delicate porcelain.

I daresay that the orchard was blossoming so magnificently in recompense for all it had suffered during the black days of the occupation. Yet not all the shrapnel had been extracted from the trunks, and this caused me no end of pain and grief.

The Secretary and I walked side by side along the alley and chatted. I told him how we had restored the orchard after the war, how our watchman, Grandfather Yarema, had been flogged by the fascist commandant for refusing to show him the hybrid plot, how the other collective farmers had drawn a red herring across the commandant's path when he began to look for it himself. I made no attempt to conceal our losses from the Secretary, and told him that the enemy had taken part of our nursery to the Reich in freight cars, part of it only, because, as is well known, he choked on what he tried to swallow. I unburdened my heart to the Secretary, and told him my plans for the future. I even wanted to complain about Meleshko for refusing to hire aeroplanes for spraying purposes, but then thought better of it: it wasn't the right moment for that kind of thing.

Each time we came to a particularly brilliant floscule, the Secretary stopped and took off his hat, as if greeting the tree. I took this as a sign that the Central Commit-

tee Secretary was no mean gardener himself. Later he confessed to me that this was so.

It was simply astounding how much we resembled each other—standing there in front of an apple-tree! And not just in height and figure! I sensed that we had a lot in common in mind and character.

"Thanks, Comrade Bratus, for what you've done, thanks for your fruitful life," he said. "Islands of blossom like yours are few as yet in our land, and we want more than single islands; orchards should stretch across our Soviet country from end to end, should cover it like the spring floods. At present only a few of our collective farms have much in the way of orchards. There aren't enough fruit-trees on the personal plots of the collective farmers, particularly in the South. That's intolerable! We must have orchards everywhere—not just on collective and state farms; not just on the personal plots of collective farmers, workers and employees; we must have them on the territory of our machine and tractor stations, mines, schools, hospitals and children's homes. We want to see our cities girdled with green belts of fruit-trees.... What do you say, Comrade Bratus?"

Could my opinion be other than favourable?

"I'm all for it," I exclaimed.

"Well, your 'for' and my 'for' will win the day, Comrade Bratus. We'll make our land what we want it to be. Our Ukraine will be a garden republic, a model experimental field of communism.

"The day is not far off, when people will come from all corners of the earth to see what we are doing," he added.

His words took root in my soul. He left me with the feeling that I had had a glimpse of the future, of a splendid new world.

Year by year this splendid new world draws nearer and nearer, our dreams are coming true.

3

The orchard stands on an historic site. Legend has it that the Zaporozhskaya Sech* was held on this island, where brave Cossacks roamed free and lighthearted. Actually it is an ideal spot for an encampment. Clearly, our ancestors were no fools when it came to tactics and strategy! The island, you see, towers like a fortress, its back to the impassable river meadows, its face commanding a view of the southern steppe. The wild Tartar hordes could be seen for miles away. My friend Roman Romanovich, the history teacher, says that it was on our island that the Cossacks composed their famous reply to the Turkish Sultan Mahomet who, in his ignorance, proposed to make them his subjects. That seems to be a fact. When laying out the orchard, the ploughshares turned up light Cossack pistols, cannon, and inkwells. One of the ink-wells, by the way, is very much like the one in the Repin painting,** it is almost as if it had dropped off the canvas.

Archeologists have unearthed the remains of ancient Cossack smelting furnaces (primitive things, when compared to the furnaces in the Dnieper plants today).

Some time later, when excavating the site of the wine-cellar, we came across one of the men of the Sech—a Cossack, a giant of a man! He must have been one of the ordinary Cossacks who from time immemorial served on the Sech. He had no silver, no gold, no treasure. He was, of course, reduced to dust, poor fellow; only the long lock of hair that once graced the top of his shaven head, and his sabre, had survived. And guess what we found under the Cossack saddle that served as his pillow!—A

* Zaporozhskaya Sech—Cossack military encampment of several centuries ago in Zaporozhye.

** The allusion is to the painting by I. E. Repin of Zaporozhye Cossacks writing a letter to the Turkish sultan.—*Tr.*

bottle of potent Ukrainian mead—vodka! Sealed with wax and full to the brim, it had stood the test of time—it was thick and as clear as a dewdrop.

So we drank a toast to our glorious Cossack ancestors.

I myself, Mikita Bratus, am of Cossack stock, and I'm more than certain that one of my ancestors had a hand in composing the reply to the Turkish Sultan. Why, you may ask, do I think so? I know, of course, that there are no witnesses to bear it out, but as I gaze at the Cossacks in the Repin painting, crowding round the scribe and laughing merrily, I feel the affinity between us, and even between our views on the aggressive Turk.

I, too, like a good joke and cannot endure glum people.

Orishka often asks me when, if ever, I shall be more serious; but what's to be done if I take life easy. Ours is a gay generation, and I'll not change until my dying day. I'll die with a smile on my lips and the girls will bury me right here in the smiling orchard, in the heart of the gay Cossack island. Will that be death? Sometimes I think that I'm immortal. And maybe I am. Certainly, you'll never catch me hanging myself ... except, perhaps, around the neck of a pretty maiden.

I maintain to this day that a man's wife is one thing, and women—quite another.

4

Have you met my Orishka? Here she comes up the path with my dinner. She's "my Orishka," but sometimes they say "Orishka's Mikita," and that goes against my grain.

Maybe I, myself, am to blame for this unpleasant soubriquet. The thing originated at the front. There was a big meeting in our division, at which I addressed the men as a representative of the Ukrainian people

(soldiers of many nationalities spoke at the meeting, for we faced the enemy shoulder-to-shoulder beneath the same banner!). Well, after saying that I was sure we'd soon be in Berlin, I concluded by saying that "Mikita would surely return from the war to his own Orishka."

The label stuck.

"Who's the fellow in the medical battalion that potters about with trees?" someone would ask.

"Oh, it's Mikita, Orishka's husband," the reply would be, or simpler still: "It's Orishka's Mikita grafting again."

In truth, I was always planting and grafting trees. Trees of my grafting can be seen in Voronezh and Suma, in Poland and even Germany, beyond the Oder.

Most of my army service was done with the medical battalion of our Guards division. They wouldn't let me go after recuperating from my first wound. "A chap with a sense of humour is the best medicine the wounded can get," they said.

At the front I dreamed about our orchard almost every night. I'd start up in my sleep, and my neighbour would grumble angrily: "Go easy with those boots, Bratus! What's the matter?"

"Stepping over the strawberries," I'd reply.

"What strawberries?"

"I dreamed that I was at home on my island, and that there were strawberries as big as tomatoes at my feet.... Couldn't trample them, could I?"

"I suppose not, but don't kick me either!" He would then pull his greatcoat up to his chin and return to his snoring.... And I'd turn over and see my orchard again.

My Orishka comes up to me.... She's more than my wife, she's a problem. I love her; and yet I hate her nagging. Although we are both over fifty she's jealous of

every young woman in my work team, and the older she grows, the worse she gets.

The girls know this, and like to pull her leg.

"Let me sit by your side, dear Uncle Mikita!" one of them coos, putting her hand on my shoulder the moment Orishka comes into sight. It's harmless fun, and forgotten the next minute, but you should hear what I get when I come home! Orishka is much taller than I am and, touch wood, she's as large as life: a hundred-and-five kilos. I'm not a weakling by any means, and my arms are still strong, but I'm a mere sparrow compared with Orishka. She could bundle me up in her petticoats and carry me off.

Orishka takes advantage of this and goes on the rampage at the slightest suspicion.

"Hey," she says, "look me straight in the eye. What was Darina doing prancing round you today?"

"Can I help it, Grandmother, that she would have her little joke?"

"Joking!" she snaps back, "I could see your mouth watering! Too boring at home, I suppose, so you seek your fun elsewhere!"

"What's that you are saying!" I flare up; but Orishka blandly ignores me.

There you have the difference between a wife and a woman. Judge for yourself.

When she sees that her scolding has failed, Orishka runs off to Comrade Meleshko.

And she sticks to him like plaster, and makes him promise to transfer the girl to another team. Logvin Potapovich is a man that can twist the devil himself round his little finger, but not Orishka. Finally he gives in.

But making a promise is an easy matter, keeping it is quite another. The girl won't hear of leaving the

team, not even for the sake of peace in the Bratus family.

"Don't think you can bully me just because I'm a widow! Are there too many of us in the orchard? Don't I pull my weight? Or maybe you think that I pilfered water in the summer, or monkeyed about with the valves at night to get more water for my section? Why are you silent, Mikita Ivanovich (this to me)? Tell them."

I uphold the truth, of course, and supply the needed information: Darina never took any water at night. How can I blame her for something she didn't do?

"Well, that's that!" the young woman turns on Meleshko. "What do you want? That tigress (meaning my Orishka) can say what she likes, but I'm not budging from the team."

The young woman is perfectly right whichever way you look at it. Meleshko has another go, and then leaves the girl in peace. Both he and Orishka are helpless: just try shoving somebody about that works well!

Today my Orishka is wreathed in smiles as she comes up the path with her basket. Possibly the milk yield has increased, or the spring has turned her head.

Always frank and truthful, I do not deny that Orishka sometimes has the upper hand at home ... but not in the orchard! That's my bailiwick, my laboratory, here I am the master, everything sides with me: the labels on the experimental trees, the hybrids in the gauze hoods, the lemons in the trenches, and all my light-hearted assistants—much the same as it was in the medical battalion's operating-room: after crossing the threshold, one came under the domination of the head nurse; and I'm the head on the island—I, Orishka's Mikita, alias Mikita Ivanovich Bratus!

There are days when Orishka is a bit afraid of me. Then she comes to me meek, gentle and soft—so soft that you could dress a wound with her softness. This oc-

curs in those clear spring days, such as we are having now, or when the trees are in blossom and again during the golden harvest. On such days, seeing that even the trees obey me, she can't help being obedient herself! The trees grow taller or shorter, with a conical or horizontal crown, all at my bidding. I am the one that shapes them. "Must be polite to Mikita in the garden," Orishka thinks most likely. "It's his bailiwick, and he does as he pleases there. He might stamp his foot and shout, 'turn into a strawberry, Orishka,' and sure enough, right in front of all these people, I'd be transformed into a strawberry.

"How cheerful we are today, Grandmother," I say to her. "Had a set-to with someone, I suppose."

"You've guessed it, Mikita," she confesses.

It was an easy guess, for it's common knowledge that Orishka first bandies words with all the visitors that come to her dairy-farm, and only afterwards does she enquire about their business.

I always wonder how the cows stand her. Orishka says that they had to remove their churlish night watchman because the cows like peace and quiet. But since then our selectionists must have bred a new species of cow with stronger nerves, capable of standing up to Orishka's vehemence.

"Sit down, Grandfather!" she orders, "Eat your dinner while it's hot."

Orishka rarely calls me grandfather—only when she's in good humour.

"Not hungry yet," I reply, "the girls have just given me some meat-patties."

"No wonder you're all of a flutter.... I suppose you've been down to that trollop's wine-cellar?" she chides, meaning our storekeeper.

"Yes, but I didn't have a drop. Just to get the pruning-shears."

Orishka looks at me, one eye burning ominously, the other smiling.

"All right! Eat!"

I'm a lively chap with rosy cheeks, and vitality seems to be just gushing out of me. Many people think Bratus is a bit of a tippler, but it's only my nature—vigorous and lusty.

"You should know why I look lit up, Orishka. I like lots of pepper, it makes the blood circulate.... Did you see my girls? They were at your dairy."

"Yes, I saw them. They're shifting the humus. But why do you ask? Are you lonesome without them?"

"Almost," I answer. "Was it with them you had the brawl?"

"No, I saw them only at a distance. I quarrelled with the film people—they've been hanging about the dairy-farm for the past two days."

"Shooting you from the wrong angle, I suppose?"

"Comrade Bratus this, Comrade Bratus that ... ordering me about all the time," Orishka complains. "The milksops think they can teach me how to milk cows! 'You have no idea of the cost of this film,' they said to me, 'it runs into thousands! As for your milk—that's a mere trifle. If you don't make the grade of a Heroine of Labour, we'll buy ten pails of milk for you provided you do what we tell you, and stop when we tell you to stop!'... Imagine, the cheek!"

"Don't give in, Orishka," I advise. "As you see they are a backward bunch."

"So that's the way you reckon, I said to them, you think I couldn't buy ten pails of milk if I wanted? I could buy the milk and you, too, and all your films. You think I'm concerned only about pails of milk.... What about the cows? What about their regime? What about the skill of our people? Do you think you can buy the skill of our collective-farm husbandmen at the market along

with ten pails of milk? It may be, I told them, that I want to get the highest milk yields so that all the milk-maids in the Ukraine can learn from me!... Never fear, I told them off, the monkeys!"

I can well believe it. Orishka is a past-master at arguing. During our married life I've heard some brilliant speeches, some more restrained than others, but, as a rule all brilliant.... Do you think that she always coveted the Gold Star of a Labour Heroine, that she always backed the collective-farm system? If you have such an impression, then you don't know my Orishka!

Let's go back to the beginning of collectivization, to the most turbulent days. In those days my Orishka tore the tail of Karp Lisogor's coat, and ruled the roost among the backward women at every small and big gathering.

I'll never forget that winter meeting when the fate of our collective farm hung in the balance. The school-building was too small to hold the crowd, and we gathered on the square outside. The speakers addressed us from a platform in the middle of the square.

Orishka didn't speak, but she raged and stormed among the women.

"Let's all leave!" she yelled. "Give us back our horses and harness!"

They just couldn't stop her. She had ten words to the chairman's one.

"My wife," I thought, "and it's up to me to pacify her."

I came to the platform. The square was packed with people, and the women in particular were terribly excited. I observed a number of curious-looking "females" nosing about among our own women (later, in the office it was discovered that they were male kulaks, trousers, axes, and all, beneath their flowing skirts). Next day these "women" had a solid growth of beard on their chins.

The moment I began to speak Orishka spurred me, and shrieked, "Beat him! He's backing the commune!"

I renewed my attempt, but again I was howled down by the women. I just couldn't make myself heard.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" I roared. "Even a dog is allowed to bark before it's hanged, so what d'you think I am?"

That quietened them, it even drew a laugh: a joke has extricated me from many a tight corner.

"Do you know who it is that's inciting you?" I asked, pointing to my wife, "it's that loud-mouthed Orishka! Surely you know her?"

Silence.

"If she were to spit into the Dnieper," I continued, "all the frogs in the river would be found dead the next day."

How they laughed at that!

The whole square shook with laughter, bringing things to a happy climax. A sense of humour was indispensable in those days.

For a long time Orishka never forgave me. She harped on that incident time and again. But now times have changed, and she hates the mere mention of it.

Every time I bring the matter up she says: "You keep bragging that you can remake nature; but am I less than nature to you?"

Whatever your impression may be, however, grandmother and I live in peace and harmony. I try to influence her the Michurin way, using the method of the merry mentor, and, believe me, it works. Don't think that Orishka does nothing but nag; she can laugh, too. And when she does, the house rocks with merriment!

The winning of Orishka's heart called for diplomacy on my part. I returned a young gallant from tsarist military service—but as poor as a church mouse. The mulberry-tree in the yard was my sole property. No man

would think of giving me his daughter for a wife. But the tsar paid me off with brand-new copper coins straight from the mint. Moneybags Mikita! So I sat on the porch one sunny day and kept counting them. I'd drop them into my purse one by one, and then turn them out again, pretending to see and hear nothing. People saw me at my occupation, and as we were up to our ears in superstition the news spread through the village like wildfire: "Ginger Mikita has come back from the army with golden coins. I saw them myself!"

Two weeks later I married the black-browed Orishka.

Nor have we lived in vain. We have three sons, falcons all, and a peach of a daughter. The eldest—Mikhail—is a navigator in the merchant marine, Bogdan—the second—works in the neighbouring Red Banner Mine, and the youngest—Fedya—is still at school.

Ludmila, our daughter, is studying in the pedagogical college in Kiev. Many years ago I named my first cherry Pionerka in her honour, because my first success coincided with the year of her birth. Today Ludmila is an enthusiastic member of the Komsomol.

"I want to be a teacher," she says.

"Fine, my girl," I tell her, "a splendid profession."

I became a grandfather like a bolt from the blue (Mikhail and Bogdan are married and bring up families of their own). My Fedya wonders sometimes how it is that he, a Young Pioneer, can be an uncle. Levko, his nephew, Bogdan's son, often teases his Uncle Fedya for being a year younger than he is, and one form lower in school. The young uncle dislikes the allusion, but what's to be done?

Our Chervony Zaporozhets is closely connected with the mine, and we, who work on the surface, are always in close contact with the miners working under it. In the summer our girls, the stack-binders, often put their ears to the ground to listen to the miners at work. My

god-child Tanya insists that she has heard them hewing manganese beneath the wheat.

It has become a tradition in Kavunovka for the old people to work at home, and for the young ones to go down the mines. The daughter, the son, or the son-in-law from every second or third cottage works in the mines. Some of them live in the miner's settlement, others at home in Kavunovka. Buses carry the workers in the morning and bring them back at the end of the shift. In the course of a discussion on the Kavunovka reconstruction project Lydia Tarasovna suggested building a tree-lined asphalt boulevard to the miners' settlement. Then the buses would have smoother going. The mine administration has given its backing to the plan, and I'm sure we'll soon have the boulevard. We shall supply the sand and trees, the mines will supply the asphalt and other material, and the work will be carried out by both.

I have been thinking about a name for the new highway: Boulevard of Unity of Town and Village, or, better still, Peace Boulevard (the meeting will decide). Fraternal bonds link us with the mines. In the dark drivers from other parts often take Kavunovka for the Manganese Settlement, because both the settlement and the village are equally well lighted. We have one secondary school and a common club-house, and jointly celebrate all holidays.

At celebration meetings I often sit by Bogdan's side on the platform. The miners nominate him for the platform because he is the leading hewer, and I'm elected by the collective farmers. And since both of us—father and son—are red-headed, people call it the golden presidium. When we take our seats on the platform my excited grandchildren, perched on a window-sill alongside their young uncle, always shout: "Hurrah for the golden presidium!"

And we've just got to grin and bear it.

The role of grandfather suits me as little as the role of uncle suits Fedya. I'm proud of my grandchildren; my shoulders and my drooping whiskers are always at their disposal (it's a pleasure to have the warm, lively little creatures nestling about one), but as for being a real grandfather.... No, I don't want that!

"Next time I'm in town," I tell Orishka, "I'll ask the doctor to iron out my wrinkles, and come back rejuvenated."

She says a flat-iron would do the job just as well, and at less cost.

"Science will find the way," I insist. "Look at that alley of cherry-trees. They were old before I rejuvenated them.... Today I rejuvenate cherry-trees, and tomorrow someone rejuvenates me!"

"What about me, Mikita?" she asks then.

"And you, too," I promise. Why not, after all? Orishka and I live in complete harmony.

It is warm in the sun.

I take Orishka to see the lemons. They have been watered, and steam is rising from the trenches.

Orishka stands spell-bound at my back. Evergreen! I butt into her thoughts:

"That's my bit for communism!"

5

If my orchard could speak, it would probably say: "Bratus' team are doing me well! They're working hard all over the island; that red-headed Mikita always puts the right people in the right place, just like an experienced conductor."

One job supplements the other. Some of my girls cart manure, some whitewash the trees and prune the branches, while others pile up smoke mounds against the early-morning frosts. Wave your baton, conductor, but

not like the conductors in tail-coats who stand with their backs to the public—step lively, Mikita, make your rounds at the double, from the vineyard to the drier, and from the drier to the water-pump at the other end of the island: they're starting repairs there today. Whichever way you look—morning, noon, or night—your glance will fall on Mikita.

My feet never fail me! My calves, all muscle, are as hard as iron, the result of daily steeplechasing around the orchard, across the magnificent island heights.

I never let the pruning-shears out of my hands, and when there's a minute to spare I join the others at their happy toil.

The girls have discarded their overcoats. I, too, part with my padded jacket for the first time since the winter.

If the girls let their eyes wander and start making slips, it's a sure sign that a young, unmarried stranger has set foot in the orchard.

Who is it that's disturbing them now?

Ha, what did I tell you? Young Apollon Komashka, Ziuza's godson, is snooping about my trenches. What cheek! He is heading straight for the lemons without even asking permission. Maybe he thinks that being Apollon, he can do as he likes.

Where Ziuza has acted as godfather you come across weird names. If it isn't Reconstruction (for a girl), it's Apollon (for a boy). This poor chap happens to be his godson—so he is named Apollon, after the young Greek god Apollo. And have the two anything in common besides the name? But about that anon. The lad distinguished himself in the war, no denying it. There he goes, in his greatcoat unbuttoned, medals gleaming in the sun, including the Order of Glory. At present he is the gardener at the Orjonikidze Mine. In the winter he attended my two-week Michurin course. A clever

chap, and a gardening enthusiast, but how he will turn out still remains to be seen.

Komashka greets us but doesn't venture to state his business in the presence of a crowd of girls. He winks to me and calls me aside, but I pretend to be dumb, and wink back. The girls roar with laughter.

"I want a word with you, Mikita Ivanovich," he mumbles at last.

"Oh, yes. Why didn't you say so?" What's behind all the secrecy, why does he hem and haw? It's like that with people who, in battle would knock out the devil himself, but get cold feet in the presence of girls.

We go to my Michurin laboratory.

On the way I ask Apollon to stop beating about the bush and tell me his business. The lad looks at the trees with greedy eyes, and blurts out:

"I've come to steal."

"Not an easy task," I reply, "Everything worth taking is deeply rooted here."

"That's nothing!" he exclaims, laughing in a funny way. "During the war they kidnapped a militiaman right under my nose."

"Go easy, young man," I advise him.

"It was a pretty tough time," he went on, "sailors were on their way to liberate Rostov—ferocious devils.... It happened at a North Caucasian railway station. The militiaman had been unjust to a group of women, and the sailors, having seen his behaviour, pulled him into their carriage."

Komashka laughs good-naturedly.

"So what? Did they release him?"

"They threw all his things on to the platform. We'll give him all the fighting he wants," they said. The train pulled out on its journey, and a fortnight later the militiaman sent his wife a letter, saying he was hale and hearty and fighting with the marines."

"You're a pretty fibber, comrade," I say. "Couldn't have done better myself, but I wonder if you're as good a gardener.... I'll visit you one of these days and look around."

"Much obliged, Mikita Ivanovich," he retorts. "Drop in and give us a few hints."

You can rest assured that I'll keep my promise. Their orchard is young—once in a while it needs an experienced eye to look it over. Every summer I make the rounds of all the orchards within a radius of thirty miles. I visit collective-farm orchards, school plots, and mine gardens.... Why should a gardener shrink into his own little shell? He might be able to help a fellow, and then, before he knows where he is, he'll pick up a useful hint or two himself.

There's a heap of thrice-accursed metal in a corner of my laboratory—the thousands of pieces of shrapnel that I extracted from the tree-trunks after the war.

"Why don't you sell that scrap?" Komashka asks.

"Let it be, comrade," I say. "That heap of shrapnel is a constant reminder of the blessings of peace."

I have a nicely coloured map on the wall. My daughter copied it from a magazine during her holidays. On another wall is a shelf with our best winter apples: the Michurin Pippin Shafranny, the Reinette Semirenka, the Mleyev Beauty, the Snowy Calville, and the Golden Winter Parmen ... and to the left—I draw your special attention to it—there is a large, white, elongated apple with a delicate maidenly blush on its sunny side. I've described its exterior, but it tastes even better: fragrant, firm and juicy, refreshing and sweet. You'll never guess what it is! It has never been described anywhere, and we exhibited it for the first time at last year's regional exhibition. It was the main attracton of our display. Amateur gardeners milled around it all day long, experts

spoke about it with delight. "It's a gem!" they said. "An apple filled with sunlight!"

This apple is the light of my eyes—a new variety raised right here, on our island.

My hybrids had a miraculous escape during the war. Maybe miraculous isn't the right word, because our people took care of them. My Orishka and many others were publicly flogged by the fascists on the square where I had once spoken to our stubborn women. The commandant wanted my notes on the hybrids. No more and no less, just a piece of my heart!

But Orishka stood her ground and kept mum. The collective farmers deliberately neglected the hybrids, giving free rein to the weeds and thistles so that the place shouldn't catch the eyes of the fascist Mendelists.* And when I came back from the war this beauty of an apple awaited me among the weeds and thistles.

It is very popular with the miners.

"Fragrant, juicy, refreshing! Just the thing we want!" they say.

I've raised seedlings of this new variety, and we'll plant them this spring in two sections to replace the frozen apricots.

My new variety has stood many tests, and I'm sure it'll stand any to come. I've named it Stalinskoye.

Apollon Komashka gazes in rapture at my shelf of apples. I can see that he wants to speak, but doesn't dare.

"Out with it," I command.

"Mikita Ivanovich, I...."

"Do you want an apple?" I help him.

"No, ho...."

"Honey?"

* Mendelists—followers of Mendel's reactionary biological theories.—*Tr.*

He laughs.

"How long will it be until you begin planting, that's what I want to know," he says at last.

"Don't try it on with me. Out with it. What's on your mind?"

"Seedlings."

"Should have said so to start with. But be ready for a shock, my boy: I think you won't get them. You know that I'm steeped in prejudices, and nobody gets seedlings before I start planting myself."

"I know that," Apollon sighs. Sneaking a glance at the door, he then pulls out a sealed bottle of vodka from under his greatcoat and in great confusion places it on the table.

I roar with laughter: trying to bribe me with a bottle of vodka!

"Who taught you to do this?" I ask sternly. "Was it your godfather, Comrade Ziuza? Put that bottle away this instant. Share it with one of your fellow-soldiers at home. Vodka doesn't make me more generous. I give seedlings without vodka, happy that people come to me; glad to be able to oblige, I give them at half price because I want to see bigger and better orchards, to see fruit-growing taken up everywhere. And you, should you ever have a nursery of your own, do the same. Don't be close-fisted, don't turn people away if there's anything to give, because fruit-growing is a divine calling. None but the genuine enthusiast asks for favours, and you can depend on it that he'll nurse and look after every sapling. A careless fellow will never approach you."

Apollon puts the bottle out of sight and edges closer to me.

"Well, what about the Stalinskoye?" he asks.

"What about it?"

"Our miners hold it in high esteem.... Could I have some?" he begs.

"Certainly, I'll give the Stalinskoye to anyone who wants it."

"Thanks," he says. "I'll come for it the moment you begin planting."

"Good," I reply. "But don't forget to get an invoice from the office. That's the rule, you know."

My colleague looks downcast.

"Must the office know about it? I've spoken to Comrade Meleshko and Ziuza...."

"And what did they say?"

"They said that I could have some seedlings, but not the new variety.... They said they wanted the little they had of it for their own orchard."

So that explains why you hemmed and hawed, and why you brought that desperate bottle! So you've had a go at Meleshko and Ziuza....

I'm not surprised at what Komashka has told me. I can see right through those two.... We often come across conservativism in gardening, types that are hard to change. They want to put my Stalinskoye under lock and key. Easy, lads! It isn't for nothing that I'm regarded as a tough customer. I'll break down their backwardness, and I won't take "no" for an answer!

"We begin planting the day after tomorrow," I said to Apollon. "Don't worry, I'll see to everything, you come along and get them."

We return to the garden.

"Do you get up early?" I ask him, "or does the sun catch you napping?"

"At daybreak," he assures me.

"See that the frost doesn't harm your cherry-trees, have the smoke-mounds ready," I tell him. "At cherry-blossom time frosts are dangerous at sunrise. It isn't the frost so much as the sun."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"You must know, of course, that frost is dangerous in the morning because of the sharp change in temperature. It gets at the blossom at dawn—and then comes the sun. The flowers are moist with dew, and the sun burns them through the dewdrops; it has, as it were, the effect of a magnifying glass. But the smoke screens the flowers from the sun, so you must shroud your orchard in smoke.... Perhaps you think Mikita hasn't had his share of sprinting to the island to meet the dawn there? I used to get up long before sunrise and go out into the yard. On frosty mornings I'd light a torch and make for the island as fast as my legs would carry me, tearing along like a marathon runner, putting fire to mound after mound until the orchard was shrouded in smoke.... The young ones do all the running now, but you must do it yourself, comrade!"

"My legs are long enough," he assures me, "but I'd like to ask you about grafting. We always graft a scion upon the cervical part of the root, but I want to try higher up the trunk, so that the entire tree should be wild and frost-hardy. What do you think of that?"

I'm surprised that such a simple thing never entered my head.

"Go ahead, young man, nobody can blame you for trying, and it might turn out well...."

I accompany him to the main path. I must be civil with this youngster. Maybe some day he will live up to the unusual name Ziuza gave him.

"Why do the girls laugh at me?" he asks.

"Don't let that bother you," I reply. "Laughter makes man wise."

A curious youngster, but he'll make good!

6

Logvin Potapovich Meleshko will get a piece of my mind. We're old friends and on holidays we often enjoy a drink together. But business is business, and sometimes we argue till we both reach boiling-point and perspiration bathes our brows. Why, dear Logvin Potapovich, I can see right through you! I know your weak points, and I know that you dread my criticism, although I have never belonged to the species of carping critics.

We still have windbags who hold forth just for the sake of a bit of applause. I can't stand the type, and call them forest-bugs. In themselves forest-bugs aren't dangerous, it's the excrement they deposit on the leaves. They pollute the leaves, close their pores, and a plant swarming with forest-bugs soon suffocates, shrivels and dies.

We had one of this type in our midst years ago; Comrade Ziuza is a lamb compared to him. I used to call him "Buggus Stolyarchukus Zhitomirsky," for he came to us from the Zhitomir forest region, having run away, I imagine, from collectivization. I was laying out the orchard at the time, and this Stolyarchuk hovered around me like a bird of ill-omen. He chattered like a magpie at every meeting, a past-master at polluting the air with high-sounding empty phrases.

"Dear comrades," he'd begin, "are you going to let Bratus take the shirts off your backs? His stupid orchard scheme will eat all we have!" And so he rambled on and on. To listen to him, Mikita really meant to swallow the whole of Kavunovka.

Stolyarchuk even slandered me in a letter to the local newspaper. Mikita Bratus is treacherously undermining the collective farm, he wrote, and Karp Lisogor, the Communist Party group secretary, lets him have his own way instead of exposing his harmful projects.

I don't know who was chief editor of the paper at the time. But I know that they didn't verify their information and hit out at me right and left.... Orishka was panic-stricken, but Lisogor and Meleshko calmed her:

"Your Mikita will do wonders yet, just wait and see."

Later, when the orchard really got going and we began gathering rich harvests, Stolyarchuk tacked about and started making up to me, worming his way into the orchard so as to be in on the cherry crop.

I didn't like letting him near the cherries: he was as voracious as a locust. I told the bee-keeper to gorge him with honey before he came to the cherry section, for the cherries were much too valuable!

But do you think it helped? "Buggus" would gorge himself on honey and still find room for cherries. He'd squat under a tree with a pailful between his knees, and as he talked (ever so smoothly!) he'd flick cherry after cherry on to his tongue until finally, he'd scrape the bottom of the pail with his nails. Then he'd wipe his mouth and get up, but there wouldn't be a single cherry-stone in the vicinity (and I needed the stones!). I still wonder how he could hold all he ate. Had he been a man, but there he was—a rotten, beggarly, lying wretch, voracious and good-for-nothing. He caused me a lot of trouble, but he is no longer with us. One night, blind-drunk on homebrew, he lost his way in his own vegetable garden, stumbled into a shallow pool and drowned. An inglorious end.... The man had crawled about the earth snapping at people, while survivals of the past ate deep into his soul. Then he drowned in his own field, and nobody lamented his death.

When I meet people like him I make short work of them. If there's anything that gets my goat, it's survivals of the past! Then I don't spare even my dear Orishka!

Logvin Potapovich knows my temper and my principles. Just before our annual general meeting takes place,

Meleshko is all milk and honey and makes the most wonderful promises: I'll never take people from your fruit-growing team for field work, he says, and I'll get you all the insecticids you need, and hire planes to do the spraying; what's more, I'll come to all the Michurin lectures.... In short, Meleshko becomes science's closest friend.

Far be it from me to disregard these promises, but at the meeting I have a few words to say about our chairman. The man needs it! Where is the man that would like to see a friend, one of the most ardent organizers of the artel, getting the boot after being chairman for twenty years?

"We boast," I say from the platform, "that seven hundred of the nine hundred operations in our collective farm are now mechanized. We boast that most of our collective farmers have mastered more than one speciality, that all our young people have finished at least the seventh class. That is true and laudable. But how are we, the older generation, keeping step with the youth? Are all of us sufficiently far-sighted and nimble? What are we doing to improve ourselves? Do we take an interest in science and culture? Isn't it a fact that we attend just the first and last lectures of a course, saying that we're too busy to attend the others? Do we not use the radio-room as a spot for selling water-melons and fruit to the miners, instead of broadcasting Michurin ideas?"

The "we" is just a figure of speech, and all the time I mean Comrade Meleshko; he understands that perfectly. But the moment I get going I stop playing hide-and-seek, and say things straight to his face.

"Take heed, Logvin Potapovich," I say, "don't let our prosperity mislead you, don't let the respect we pay you, turn your head."

"Don't let the grass grow under your feet! If you do you'll have to go and nothing will save you!"

You may ask why he hasn't been ousted from the chairmanship, but that would be too simple a solution. Comrade Stalin tells us that we must train and develop people with care and attention, in much the same way as a gardener raises his favourite fruit-tree; sleep on those words.... For that one must be a great gardener, must know all the finer points of our business, and of our souls with all their delicate emotions.

Should we be blunt in Meleshko's case, remove him and be done with it? But he is a good manager, a skilful organizer, and our collective farm is renowned throughout the republic. The survivals in Meleshko are becoming more and more obnoxious, for we're going forward all the time, but we don't want to leave a good comrade to stew in his own juice, to abandon him. We know perfectly well that Meleshko's roots are well developed and healthy, and only his crown needs pruning a little.

I know why he doesn't want to give the miners my best saplings. Oh, Meleshko, Meleshko! How I wish my guess were wrong!

There are people as far-sighted as mountain eagles. But there are others, unfortunately, who need a pruning knife to graft ambition on them.

I've often wondered where our Meleshko acquired his ways and manners. Maybe it was at the time he was a minister?

Don't laugh, Meleshko really was a minister.

True, it was a long time ago, during the Civil War, when we had the Red Kavunovka Republic. We elected our own president, Yakov Pokinchereda (poor fellow, he was shot later by whiteguard bandits), organized an army, marked off our borders, appointed ministers, and sent envoys to the neighbouring villages. We even wanted to mint our own coinage, but didn't have the resources.

Our tiny republic passed muster honourably; it defended itself bravely for several months against whiteguard

gangs until the regular Red Army forces arrived. I was with the artillery (we had two field-pieces), and Logvin Potapovich Meleshko was Minister of Agriculture. As I said, I incline to the view that the ministerial portfolio hangs like a millstone on Meleshko, preventing him from becoming an exemplary collective-farm chairman.

7

I hope our ministers will not take offence and think that Mikita is disrespectful towards them.

On the contrary, I welcomed the formation recently of the Ministry of Cotton-Growing, and have no doubt that a good man has been appointed to head it. What is more, I have a suggestion for our deputies.

Isn't it high time, comrades, that we had a Ministry of Fruit-Growing? We want to see our land covered with orchards. The area under orchards in the Soviet Union has more than doubled since the October Revolution. Thanks to the Michurinists, fruit-raising has spread to remote northern regions—the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East. Our people must, and will, have an abundance of the very best fruit.

Moreover, it's more than just a matter of fruit. Orchards soften the climate, enrich the air with oxygen, and beautify our life. They ennoble human feeling and influence character. And the nearer we come to communism, the bigger and the more responsible will be the tasks placed before our fruit-growers by the state.

So, perhaps, the time has come to unify our fruit-growers under a separate ministry? Then we'd be able to assail our chief, the minister, from all angles! Unlike Meleshko, he should exercise statesmanship and, first and foremost, attend to mechanizing the labour processes of fruit-growing, to training young gardeners and developing the nurseries.

Such are my thoughts as I sum up the results of another day. Work is over, the girls have gone home, and I can hear them singing somewhere by the bridge. It is a bracing spring evening in the orchard, and the moon rises high over the steppe. The electric star sheds a red glow over the mine—a sign that our miners have reached their month's target ahead of schedule.

The orchard is silent. Suddenly Grandfather Yarema, the night watchman, sneezes loudly in the adjoining section.

I go over to him.

"Why all the sneezing?" I inquire.

"Oh, really," he replies, "why shouldn't I sneeze?"

"Look here," I say, "we've left the lemon-grove open for the night. Keep an eye on the instruments, and if you see anything suspicious, let down the frames at once."

"Must I be told, Mikita?" he replies in an injured tone. "I know what to do.... Look, I've got water in this saucer."

"What for, Grandfather?"

"What for?" he smirks. "To tell me about the frost! Water is more dependable than the liars you hang on your laboratory wall."

"Not liars," I object. "They're scientific instruments. You're old, and you've seen a lot in your day, but don't quarrel with science, it's older than the oldest man alive."

Grandfather sneezes so hard that his beard trembles.

"Sat in the draught," he explains. "Had to put on my winter things: this leather jacket and padded trousers."

Grandfather Yarema has a luxuriant beard, thick and soft and so white that it gleams in the dark. Thanks to his beard Grandfather Yarema is always delegated to present the traditional bread and salt on a hand-towel to all visiting delegations.

A Polish delegation visited us last autumn, arriving from the city in a blue bus. But in his capacity as host and guide Meleshko would not hear of them inspecting the collective-farm fields through the windows of their bus. He insisted on showing them around in our open lorry.

"It's much better," he argued. "You'll see more."

Meleshko can be very civil on such occasions. He personally helped the guests into the lorry, and was so absorbed in his task that he almost helped me in with them.... When he discovered his mistake, we looked at each other and burst out laughing.

I had just returned from the experimental station at Stepnoy with a case of booty—seeds of various southern plants. In my frayed suitcase there was tea, bay leaves, almond and khurma (persimmon). I put some of the seeds aside for my experiments, and gave the rest to the Poles. Let them do some research, I thought. A Polish girl—and a pretty lass she was—accepted the seeds and joked:

"Is this tea? What about the sugar to go with it?"

The visitors were given some of our seedlings, and thanked me profusely for them. May they grow to the glory of the new, democratic Poland!

"Keep your eyes open," I warn Grandfather Yarema once more. "Frost is a treacherous thing: it creeps up before you can blink an eyelid."

Grandfather Yarema is annoyed. "I'm not as dumb as all that," he protests. "Don't think that you're the only one that cares for the lemon-grove. What about me? Am I just a piece of furniture, getting my work-day units for nothing?"

And so on in like vein! Can you imagine?

"Have you forgotten," I interrupt him, "how you swung at me with the flail?"

"For the blanket?"

"Exactly. Do you remember saying that I was sewing a blanket for our Kavunovka?" I remind him.

"Why bring that up, Mikita?... I was ignorant then. There was a rumour that everybody in the collective farm would sleep side-by-side under a single blanket. It was all right for you, young people, I thought, but what about me? Where would I find a cosy place for myself? By the time I'd have counted all the feet sticking out from under the blanket, I'd come to the end of it—away over at the mines—and the night would be over.... But swinging the flail at you was only a joke."

"Some joke!" I exclaimed. "Had it landed it would have been the end of Mikita!"

"Let bygones be bygones, Mikita!" Grandfather pleaded. "We were like children then."

Bygones! How many unforgettable, stormy events we have witnessed! What a burden the heart of man is called upon to bear! But it has stood the test.

I walk homewards, knowing that Orishka is waiting for me by the fence.

After a hard day's work the evening is always a pleasant time. The body tingles with healthy fatigue, and the fingers still feel the grip of the pruning knife. Should my worst enemy seek a life-long ordeal for me, all he need do is deprive Mikita of his labour, his greatest joy—a life of peaceful work....

Every day my garden offers new delights. Today it was the lemons. They have survived the winter! As a child I always thought that science had already explained everything, and that all I had to do was to acquire knowledge. But now I know that the farther ahead we go, the broader the horizons.

I walk down the sloping alley of whitewashed cherry-trees, and cross the bridge at which Meleshko has put up a gate to discourage excursionists from going into the orchard. At my feet lies our dear Kavunovka. Walls

gleam white in the moonlight, electric lights blaze in the windows and on the village lamp-posts: at the collective-farm office, at the storehouse, and at the edge of the village, where Meleshko lives. He installed the lamp-post in the middle of his yard, but now he complains that it gives him no rest at night. Visitors from town, finding the chairman out of the office, make for his cottage. It's easy to find, since the bulb burns brightly all night.

There's a light showing at Lydia Tarasovna's. The Party organizer's window is wide open, flooding the room with the invigorating spring air. The radio is turned on, and her two girls are bent over something on the table —I can see them clearly from the street. Lydia Tarasovna is out on the porch, nibbling sunflower seeds. You may ask why she's not spending the evening with a newspaper in her hands, or poring over Dokuchayev. Who knows, perhaps she should be, but I personally think that there is no harm in the Party organizer taking things easy in the moonlight, beguiling the time, with roasted sunflower seeds. Let her nibble to her heart's content! Must she worry and hustle all the time, chiding people for their shortcomings, swatting, and lecturing others, just because she is Party organizer? She's human, maybe she wants to let her thoughts go back to her girlhood, or spend a few hours thinking about her husband who is away at the regional Party school. I don't blame her; no harm will come of it if she daydreams for a bit and gazes at the full moon—the theme of songs since time out of mind....

Just look at her—at her slim figure, and her eyebrows, like the wings of a swallow! I did her an injustice by thinking that she painted them black; but one day when I took a close look I saw that I had been wrong. Nature has saved her the trouble, shaping them like two thin, curving arrows.

"Good evening," I hail her.

"Greetings," she replies. "You're out late, Mikita Ivanovich! Aunt Orishka will start another investigation if you don't look sharp."

"That she will," I assent, "she has more than her share of vigilance."

"I've been told that you opened the lemon-grove today," she remarks.

"Yes, I've put the lemons into the hands of spring."

"Indeed, it seems that spring has come to stay.... Have they survived?"

"Every single one!"

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" I say. "But you had a share in them too."

"I suppose so; I was busy in town today, but I'll visit them tomorrow."

"What is the latest about enlarging the collective farms?" I ask.

"We'll amalgamate with the Pyatiletka Collective Farm before autumn, I expect," she replies.

"I wish it were sooner! I've had my eye on their orchard for years. It's overgrown with weeds—wolves have their hangout there."

"We'll soon get rid of the wolves!"

"Yes, we'll make things hum!" I promise.

"True enough, Mikita Ivanovich. They say there will be another Dnieproges at Kakhovka, and that canals will run through the steppe."

"You don't say! Another at Kakhovka! Marvellous! That's the style! When is the job scheduled to start?" I blurt out in one breath.

"Soon! Very soon."

"Excellent! A hydroelectric station, and canals! On a Bolshevik scale, I'm sure!... Can you just picture the orchards that we'll lay out along the canal banks? I'll do it myself," I exclaim.

She smiles.

"Yes, be ready, Mikita Ivanovich..."

"Always ready—like a Young Pioneer!"

I turn homewards in agitation. Lydia Tarasovna has brought good news; a new Dnieproges at Kakhovka! Canals in the Taurida steppe! Transforming the nature of our South! Orchards stretching away to the Black Sea, cotton and wheat fields sprawling over new huge areas!

This is news indeed! I'm overjoyed, and yet... is it so unexpected? Had I been told in the old days about such a magnificent project I wouldn't have believed it, but now.... Now I have no doubts! Aren't we equal to such a vast undertaking? Of course we are!

It's just like Lydia Tarasovna to stand complacently in the moonlight, nibbling sunflower seeds, and the bearer of such glad tidings! Now I know that she wasn't looking at the moon, but at something else—beyond the mines, bathed in the moonlight, lies our glorious, young Kakhovka.

8.

Orishka is in a bad humour. A big mail awaited me—all of it written in girlish hands. Only one letter—from my old friend Stepan Fedorovich Mironets, manager of the Stepnoy Experimental Station—escaped Orishka's censorship. She pried into all the others: I can tell by the smudgy finger-prints (she resealed them with flour paste). She never rests until she has checked on me, but afterwards she's conscience-stricken and out of sorts, as though I were the one to blame. Someone should tell her that there's a law against opening other people's letters.

"Fresh from the mail," I hint, "not even dry yet."

But Orishka bites her lips and remains silent as a tomb.

The letters are from the young gardeners (girls among them, too!) who attended the Michurin classes that I conducted last winter. They are a keen bunch. I like them.

One of them writes about the things he's doing this spring, another queries something he didn't understand in winter, and all of them want seedlings. The Stalinskoye apple, they say, is the one after their own heart.

"Dear Mikita Ivanovich!

"Spring is here. I've dug up our orchard and have purchased pruning knives and shears; now I'm digging holes for the saplings. I want some of yours, so put me down for a few of your Stalinskoye. I hope you haven't forgotten your promise. (Did I promise? Never!)

"Michurin greetings from
"Pavlo Pligun."

This whippersnapper can get around anybody; he'll go places!

Then there's a letter from my favourite student, Zina Snegireva, of Kakhovka District—a lively and attractive lass!

"... In addition to gardening, I take a class by assignment of the Komsomol, acquainting people with fruitgrowing and its significance. Funny how people sometimes confuse *chubuks* with *chibouks** ... I'm delighted with the work and want to do everything myself. Mother complains that she sees me only when I'm asleep. Never mind, I say to her, think of the wonderful garden that we're making of these quicksands!..."

Then she adds: "...let me have a few Stalinskoye seedlings." This stubborn little cabbage will get some, to be sure, for I know that my saplings will become part of new Dnieproges, part of the happy life in the rejuvenated, irrigated steppe.

But Liubov Drobot, Zina's friend, isn't getting on very well from what I can gather. I can see her in my

* *Chibouk*—vine tendril, *chubuk* is a Ukrainian pipe.—*Tr.*

mind's eye: hair piled on the top of her head, walking on air like the beauty she is, pampered and untouchable.

"Greetings from the heart of the Taurida steppe! This is Liubov Drobot, your student, who has made up her mind to spend her life in the country so she can raise her own new varieties some day. I keep asking our chairman to give me someone to help me in the orchard, but he has only one reply: tomorrow. I had all but lost heart, and was just about to give up the whole thing when I thought of you, Mikita Ivanovich—always cheerful, helpful, and unbending. And I realized that my disappointment was simply a temporary weakness caused by failures in my work. Fight against it, I told myself; Mikita Ivanovich didn't have an easy time of it when he started, but look at his orchard today, at the new varieties he has developed. . . ."

Then more greetings, followed by Orishka's prying flour paste.

I can't tell you how this "temporary weakness" irritates me! There's no room for it in our business. Why does it crop up? Have our young people ever slaved bare-footed for the lord of the manor? Is there a Squire Filiber standing over them commanding them to sing from morning till night as they pick cherries to make sure that their mouths are too busy to taste a single one? A twenty-year-old girl bursting with health and raising a fine orchard, assailed by "temporary weakness" after her first clash with an old grouch! . . . I shan't mince words in my reply to her. The others can wait, but she'll get my answer at once.

Stepan Fedorovich writes that a meeting of the council of the Experimental Station has been fixed for May 12th, and that I am expected to report about our lemon-grove, how it is standing up to the climate. I have hardly recovered from the joy and here is Mironets tugging at

my sleeve. How does he know that I have opened the trenches; some little bird must have told him. Well, the report must be made, after all, I haven't been elected a member of the council for nothing?

"Start nagging, Orishka," I say to my wife, "I shall be going to Stepnoy soon."

"Another meeting?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"It's getting to be the regular thing, isn't it? You'll be member of the Academy if you go on like this," she mocks, flapping the towel and laying the plates for dinner.

No sooner have I picked up the spoon than the door opens and Comrade Meleshko comes in, stooping slightly.

"I was passing," he begins, "and smelled something cooking at godmother Orishka's. Let's drop in, I say to myself, maybe Mikita hasn't come home yet."

"Tut, tut, godfather . . ." Orishka chimed, blushing like a girl. "What if Stepanida should hear you talk like that. . . ."

"Stepanida isn't the tyrant that you are!" I butt in. "There's freedom of conscience in their house." Then I turn to Meleshko: "Sit down, minister."

Meleshko doesn't need to be told twice. He drops into the chair opposite mine, grunting as he puts his elbow on the table; the board creaks under his weight. This isn't the first time that Logvin Potapovich has been at my table, nor is it the first that the table-board has complained about it.

While on the subject, I would like to say that mother nature was lavish when she shaped Meleshko. He has lost weight since Lydia Tarasovna became our Party organizer, but there was a time when our blacksmiths had to change the springs of his carriage almost every week; they haven't had to do it for over a year now.

As usual Meleshko's head is carefully shaven (so his

bald patch is less conspicuous), and his big weather-beaten face is the picture of health. The huge arches of his black moustache, which always delight visitors, stand out proudly. Meleshko is always uncomfortably hot, and his tunic, with the dust-covered Badge of Merit and Great Patriotic War orders, is always unbuttoned, his hairy chest open to view. Lower down we come to the well-rounded chairman-type corporation, flaccid under the shirt and girdled with a narrow Caucasian belt (I always wonder how his thin belt stands the strain), and still lower ... but to the devil with it! The dinner will get cold if I waste any more words.

"Perhaps you'll let us have a thimbleful, Orishka? Make it raspberry brandy if you want to please us," I venture timidly.

"None left; all gone—it's been thimbleful after thimbleful all winter," she grumbles.

Knowing Orishka's temper and waiting for developments, I keep mum....

She tinkers about near the sideboard for a bit, grumbling the while, and then fills our glasses with the same raspberry brandy that had been "finished off" long ago! That's Orishka all over! A real treasure of a wife, I would never change her for any other! She lays it on thick now and again and then she goes out of her way to do one a good turn.

"Well, bottoms up!"

"Bottoms up!"

Meleshko has small, clever eyes, and they pierce you to the marrow; but when he laughs or drinks they dive out of sight into the fleshy depths of his countenance. I can't remember ever seeing Meleshko smile. When he's not growling, he laughs with a gusto that shakes the rafters.

"That's the lot," Orishka warns us, slamming the sideboard doors, "don't expect any more!"

Of course. I know all the time that it's hopeless to expect a second helping of spirits on a week-day. But we aren't heavy drinkers, and, besides, I can sense Meleshko and I are going to have a serious talk.

"Why didn't you come to the orchard today, Logvin Potapovich?" I began. "You should have seen the lemons! It was a real treat!"

"That's why I've come.... So you think they'll live?"

"Live and multiply," I promise.

"Well, thank heavens... that is, your No. 3 team and mother nature! They'll bring us in a pretty profit, I imagine," he replies.

"More than that, Logvin Potapovich."

"Certainly. We shan't put all the lemons on sale, we'll issue some in lieu of work-day units.* I spent the day hunting for pit-props around the mines: solid material for our new pigsties. But they won't give us any. D'you call that unity? D'you call that the abolition of the distinction between town and countryside? When it comes to giving, we let them have the shirts off our backs, but they won't give us even a couple of cubic metres of lumber!"

"Since when have the mines stocked lumber for us?" I ask innocently. "Never heard of it.... Maybe they've found a new way of propping?"

"Don't joke, Mikita," he answers. "I know how it's done: what's a favour where a friend's concerned, even if it isn't quite within the law?"

"I disagree! This business of personal favours might have meant a lot before, but the more we advance the less we want of it, and I think that very soon we'll stamp it out altogether. State Control means much more these days than personal favours."

* Collective farmers share in the collective-farm harvest in cash and kind in proportion to the number of work-days they put in on the collective-farm fields.—*Tr.*

"I have nothing against it," Meleshko frowns, fidgetting in his chair. "You, as member of the inspection committee, know perfectly well that we never violate the regulations in our artel, and never will. The investigating officials never find anything wrong here. Not taking out of the collective-farm kitty, but putting in—has always been my motto. The collective farm is my strength and my wealth, and I always safeguard its interests. I won't let anyone get away with a bit of our pudding, not like the Pyatiletka Collective Farm where they let pigs slip through their fingers and then draw up statements saying that one lot of pigs ate another."

"We'll put an end to that in autumn after we amalgamate," I say.

"Amalgamation is a good thing, I've always said that a big farm is more profitable than a small one. I'm for it, even if I shan't be the chairman," he replies, "but one thing worries me.... We stand a chance of getting Gold Stars this year for animal husbandry (at this Orishka pricks up her ears). You, godmother Orishka, and I, as chairman, stand a chance of getting one. But what if they elect somebody else as chairman of the amalgamated collective farm? Who'll get the Gold Star then, the outgoing chairman, or the new man?"

"Don't worry, Logvin Potapovich," I reassure him, "the Kremlin won't make a mistake. Tell me something else: has Apollon Komashka, gardener of the Orjonikidze Mine, been to see you today?"

"Oh, that whippersnapper? Yes, he has."

"What did he want?"

"Seedlings, of course, but how could I give them to him? That's where artel violations begin...."

"You refused?"

"Not exactly.... Ziuza was present, so you can ask him. We promised to sell a few, some that we shan't need ourselves.... But that's not what I said to him.

We're diplomats, have no fear!... Do you know that he asked for the Stalinskoye, ha-ha-ha!... Got wind of it!... But we aren't fools, we want cash, or lumber, and if they don't want to live in friendship they can go back where they came from. Our old friend Karp Lisogor telephoned yesterday asking for seedlings for his MTS. We can't let him go empty-handed, but even then I made no promises about the Stalinskoye."

"If you ask me," I said, "we should give some to the mine."

"You mean Stalinskoye?"

"Exactly."

"What's the matter with you, Mikita?... Such wonderful stock! No, a thousand times no!"

"It's just the stock the mines should have," I argue.

"Listen to me, Mikita," Meleshko begins, "I've known you for years: you're always day-dreaming. We're used to your hocus-pocus, but the older you get the worse you become. Are you no longer a patriot of the Chervony Zaporozhets Collective Farm? Isn't the name of your collective farm dear to you? You and I organized this collective farm, we fought for it against the kulaks and their stooges! (At this Orishka begins to rummage furiously among the pots and pans.) And now that we've come out on to the highway, healed our war wounds and acquired the strength to hold our own, you come along and want to fling the gates open: come and get it! Mikita, if you hadn't grown old here, I'd have sworn that the miners sent you."

"It's still beyond me," I reply calmly, "why you don't want the miners to have the new stock?"

"Don't try to sidetrack me, Comrade Bratus! I've always lived in amity with our dauntless working class. But have you seen their gardens? They're just beginning. They don't know as yet what kind of trees pears grow on. Today you'll give them rare and expensive sap-

lings, and tomorrow they'll give them to their goat. One day last year I was driving past the mine and saw a goat tethered to a fruit-tree—a fine watchdog, isn't it? It's all the same to a goat whether it nibbles at bourgeois West-European varieties, or at your new Michurin hybrids—it will chew both without compunction. And what's more, if I were in their place, I'd worry more about my manganese, and leave everything else alone. It's our calling, yours and mine, to plough and sow and reap. You may ask what I think of Unity Boulevard, or Peace Boulevard.... A boulevard is a boulevard, and we'll build it, of course, since it's in the reconstruction plan, but we differ in fundamentals, in the branches of industry, and don't forget it, Mikita.... Mines surrounded by orchards! Who ever heard of such a thing?! Instead of meddling with gardens they should fulfil their production quotas as well as we do, and not fumble out of schedule like a plough-horse out of the furrow—let them do that and then the victory stars will shine over their mines all the year round!"

Meleshko drew his fist across his whiskers and looked at me in triumph: try and squash that! But it's my turn now.

"Now listen," I start. "You've missed the target. Let's not throw dust into each other's eyes: this is not a round-table conference, is it? If you don't want to tell me why you and Comrade Ziuza are against the miners having orchards, I'll tell you myself, just to make things clear. You've dragged the goat into this as a blind, Logvin Potapovich. A goat bolts tree-bark today, and tomorrow we bolt the goat. That's not the problem. But as soon as the miners have their own gardens alongside ours, as soon as our Stalinskoye blossoms around every miner's cottage, as soon as the mines have their own lemon-groves—when all that happens, we won't know what to do with our own crop. Who'll buy the fruit at the stand

we set up in our radio-room? The cannery can't take all the crop, because we aren't the only suppliers. Take it to Krivoi Rog? But that's a long away off, and, moreover, the people there are likely to follow the miners' example and lay out their own gardens. What are we to do then? Either we let them plant their own orchards near the mines, and our collective-farm crop rots, or we let the mines remain barren, as they have been to this day, and we fill another ten coffers with the excellent wages the renowned miner Bogdan Bratus brings to us for our fruit, and we arrive in communist society the richest of the rich. Come now, Logvin Potapovich, make a clean breast of it: is that what you're thinking?"

"Trying to put me in the wrong, and thinking of your son Bogdan all the time, and about his rubles.... That's sheer nepotism, isn't it?"

"Comrade Meleshko, answer my question! And don't forget that Porfiry, your own son, is also a miner!"

"True enough. Porfiry has left the soil, just to be under it, but don't draw hasty conclusions, Mikita. I'll answer your question, but first you must tell me whether you enjoy seeing our display at the exhibition drawing a crowd and having our good name—not that of the neighbours' sucking-pigs—on everybody's tongue?—'That smashing apple over there, whose is it?' they ask. 'Ah, that one, they grow it on Chervony Zaporozhets. They're the only people that grow the Stalinskoye? It's their own, their collective-farm monopoly!'—But now you want to let the mines have it. Why? I don't object to you giving them apricots, or currant bushes, but why give them the Stalinskoye?! Won't anything else satisfy them?"

"Don't beat about the bush. You know as well as I do, that the miners like our Stalinskoye, its appearance and taste, and because its more refreshing than other varieties—as if intended specially for people who perform hard physical labour. You are aware, no doubt, that the

miner's work is the hardest of all. I have dreamed all my life of raising something unusual and bracing for them, something that would be a fitting reward for their great effort. You ask whether I like our display being the centre of attraction, and our name on everybody's tongue? Of course, I do. Who doesn't? But I'll like it even better when the miner who has just come up sees my chubby, refreshing Stalinskoye on his table in a cut-glass fruit-bowl. That's what I want, and I'm going to fight for it! You and Ziuza told young Apollon Komashka to go to the devil. I know all about it, although you twist and squirm like an eel, and won't admit it.... But tell me, Logvin, former minister of the Kavunovka Republic, tell me, in the name of our splendid youth: have I guessed your hidden thoughts, or haven't I?"

"Hm-hm.... You have," he admits ruefully.

"Stop pestering the poor man," Orishka interrupts me suddenly. "He is our chairman, and you're just a team leader."

"I may be just a team leader, but I know I'm right, and that gives me strength, while he, this ex-minister, the chairman, knows that he's wrong, all he does is sit there and mumble.... Be a good girl, Orishka, and pour out another thimbleful...."

Her hearing seems to fail her as I say this, and she turns on Fedya. He's making a cote for the starlings, and she raises a hue and cry about shavings flying all over the place. She can't even get on with her child, forever raising a storm in a tea-cup....

"You're a well-grounded materialist, Logvin Potapovich," I continue, "but a poor dialectician. You're a philosopher because life makes you one, but it wants to see you improve and better yourself.... You'll be up in arms now, and say that I am nobody to lecture you, not wise and educated enough. I may be known as a Michurinist and a 'militant propagator' of his ideas, and his 'faith-

ful disciple'—you never fail to add the title of 'Michurinist' to my name—but if you could probe into the innermost recesses of my soul.... There are things that gnaw at me: you haven't done enough, Mikita, you should have done more, you should have taken the bull by the horns. Michurinist science broadens the outlook and offers virtually boundless opportunities. Not all of us by far—militant Michurinists though we are—have fully grasped all the wealth of Michurin's teaching. Human hands can mould everything under the sun to the will and ambition of man, rejuvenate and reshape all flora and fauna. It's not an easy matter to perceive that, because we grew up in a world in which everything seemed to have definite limits. And suddenly there open before us undreamed of horizons, prospects and vistas! Don't think that I never feel the dead-weight of past prejudices.... This winter our young gardeners came to me, to the wise Michurin sage. Do what you like with us, but teach us, they said! And what did I do?... I had gone through life with my eyes wide open, and could tell them about the valuable pointers I had picked up here and there. But face to face with that crowd of knowledge-thirsty youngsters, imparting the teaching of Michurin, I felt, as I went along, that I myself was still hemmed in, that I was setting the same limitations for my pupils. One or two noticed this, but the others had blind faith in the 'old propagator'... Hold on, Mikita, I said to myself, something has gone wrong. Try it without the limitations, and see what happens if you put your shoulder to them and break them down. And I convinced myself that it could be done. One has to work one's way to the wide-open spaces, rise to full stature, and beware of the ruts, of the beaten paths—no matter how easy they may seem. We are the pioneers of real life, men of progressive science, so let's be merciless in relation to ourselves. Let youthful daring and indomitable courage

accompany us at every step. We have every right to feel just as God felt during the first seven days of creation."

I can see that Meleshko disagrees. He sits there thoughtfully, chewing the ends of his black whiskers; surely, in a minute he'll say that the age of miracles is past—just wait and see!

And sure enough it comes. Miracles don't happen, Mikita. And so am I evolving, developing by revolutionary leaps and bounds, and being re-shaped day in and day out. It's a continuous process....

I interrupt him: "The process is quite all right, but don't indulge in too many leaps and bounds: they might lead to errors."

"What errors?" he asks. "When we enter into communism you will be able to ask me for anything that takes your fancy. You'll get it. You must be aware, Mikita, that Meleshko knows how to keep in step. You'll never hear of Meleshko's shrewd combinations when we come to communism. We are not heading for climes where there will be shady deals, profiteering, or huckstering, but for universal abundance. I know it, Mikita, and I'll strangle all the survivals of the past that still lurk in me, and, what's more, I'll not give them a second thought. But what would come of it if today, prematurely, we were to adopt the principle 'to each according to his needs'? You have taken me to task for the mines, and want me to give them the shirt off my back, but I'll resist and stand by the regulations. I wouldn't be much of a manager if I were to give away our collective-farm property right and left! You want me to give it to one, to another, to a third.... But I want to know: does anyone ever give us anything?"

"Don't distort the facts," I reply. "Facts are stubborn things and speak for themselves. If you mean the pit-props, then the miners are perfectly right in their refus-

al: a mine is not a timber shop. Think of all the other things they have given us, things that are much more important. Who supplies you with electric power, Comrade Meleshko?—The Dnieper Hydroelectric Station. Where did you get all the tractors and machines? What would you do without them today? Even the hens would be lording it over you in the ashes that the fascists left behind if it hadn't been for our working class, for our miners and their manganese. Do you know where it goes, this manganese? And then, take our orchard, for instance.... Where did we get the saplings for No. 1 section?—From Michurin in far-away Kozlov. And the lemons? Maybe you produce them yourself? No. They are a present from fraternal Georgia. They came by sea, wrapped in gauze, and their roots packed in moss."

Meleshko blushes, although a moment ago I'd have sworn that he couldn't be redder.

"I'd rather send the saplings to Georgia, than give them to our clients! I'd rather send them to the Urals, and even beyond the Urals! You can't scare me with that kind of stuff. Go and teach fraternal bonds to those who need it, I'm quite aware of them myself," he says.

"I'm not teaching, Comrade Meleshko," I reply. "I'll leave that to the Party organization. The other day I had a talk with our Party organizer, Comrade Bashtova...."

"So you've been telling tales about me?" he flares up.

"What tales?"

"About the mines and the saplings, I suppose."

"Naturally!" I reply. "I've told her everything. I told her that you and Comrade Ziuza decided to hoard the new species, to shut it away from the world."

Meleshko hangs his head, and wilts right there in front of me—I even feel sorry for him.

"I didn't expect that from you, Mikita," he mumbles. "So you've complained about me, and all because of this Komashka; after all that we've been through together it means nothing to you...."

Meleshko's whiskers droop despondently.

"Have no fear, old man," I confess, "keep up that ministerial chin! True, I had a chat with Lydia Tarasovna, but not about you. We spoke of pleasanter things.... You said you expected communism to be proclaimed by decree, but look around: it's sprouting, and showing a lively growth. In Kakhovka it will soon be in full blossom, no less!..."

9

No matter when I go to sleep, whether early or after midnight I am always up at dawn. This is a habit. I may not get much sleep, but it's always sound, and I have the most wonderful dreams.

Can you divine dreams? I had an extraordinary one last night!

Orishka and I were getting ready to go to the club, as it were. I shaved, trimmed my moustache, and then passed the palm of my hand over my cheek, and lo—all the wrinkles on it vanished! I stroked the other cheek with the same effect. I gazed in wonder at myself: young again!

"What do you think of that, Orishka?"

And she replied:

"Do it to me!"

I came up to her and lightly stroked first one cheek and then the other—and behold, Orishka stood before me as she had been in her youth: round-faced, black-browed, and fresh.

We were in our Sunday best and we scrutinized each other. She wore a shawl, I had new shoes and galoshes;

she was pinning a Gold Star* to her dress, I—a laureate's medal.**

We walked out of our yard on to a wide, asphalt road which seemed familiar, but new.

As we walked I had the impression of voices hissing at my back:

"Look at Bratus, he's all dressed up...."

"Which Bratus? The one that used to run about barefooted, raising the dust with his stick?"

I turned round. The street was empty, but the voices were still there:

"He's a bigwig now! Back from his wage-slaving in the Taurida, and putting on airs!"

I turned again—there was not a soul in sight. They were either hiding in the dust, or invisible, not daring to show their faces.

"Ignore them," Orishka counselled. "Don't you know who they are? Even the galoshes rouse their curiosity. They're the ones who used to dream of being tsars and of eating Ukrainian bacon all day long, and of sleeping on fresh hay every night."

"To be sure!" I said. "I recognize the voice.... That's him! The one who went barefoot from snow-time to snow-time, and girded his waist with a piece of string!... What does he want?"

"I told you not to pay any attention to him," Orishka advised again. "It's a ghost."

We reached the end of the village and continued along the highway. The going was uphill. We were in our southern plains, that I could see, but the highway ascended steadily, and soon a translucent emptiness engulfed

* Gold Star—the Gold Star awarded to Heroes of Labour.—*Tr.*

** Laureate—Stalin Prize winners are often called Laureates. —*Tr.*

us; the highway became as blue and as bright as the spring sky.

"Where are we?" I thought. My heart missed a beat as I saw the sun roll out in front of us. It was as big as it is in the morning, and we were walking towards it.

"Orishka," I whispered, "we are... going there?"

"Yes," she replied, looking intently at the orb, which grew bigger and bigger at every step. Although blazing brilliantly, it did not hurt the eyes.

"Does it hurt your eyes, Orishka?" I asked.

"No," she answered curtly.

"Then you must be an eagle! Only eagles can stare at the sun," I exclaimed.

"And you, are you an eagle?" she countered with a smile.

Chatting thus, we approached the sun which by this time had grown into a tall mountain of gold. Unafraid, we stepped right into it, into its midst, where the air was as fragrant and radiant as it is in our orchard at blossom-time. I was haloed in a lustrous brightness, and although walking through the heart of the sun I was not singed, conscious only of a warm glow, and light on my feet. We walked right through the sun and came out on the other side.

A boundless golden plain spread before our eyes. Never had I seen such beauty! It seemed that eternal summer reigned here, and eternal fellowship among men. Everything was pleasing to the eye, gay and dazzlingly bright.... Asphalt roads receded to the left and right; the corn-growers' field huts gleamed white in the steppe, buried in the verdure of gardens. Combines cruised through wheat that was as tall as a man, but I did not see any combine-operators.

"Incredible!" I exclaimed. "How are they driven?"

"Don't you know?" Orishka shrugged. "They're radio-controlled!"

"Really!"

Then we came to green pastures that stretched away to the horizon. Sheep drifted by—thousands of fine-fleeced merino sheep.

"This is our Taurida!" I shouted. "Mark my words."

Were the sheep also shepherded by radio?—No, far away in the distance I caught sight of a shepherd, dressed in the white drill of a tourist. Guess who it was! It was Bogdan, my second son, from the Red Banner Mine!"

"Bogdan," I asked, "what are you doing tending sheep?"

"It's my turn," he replied.

"Your turn? But who's mining the manganese?"

"Who d'you think?" Bogdan exclaimed in surprise. "Why, Comrade Meleshko is in the pit today."

Unusual, but sensible!

Then I asked Bogdan what he would do with his snow-white drill suit in the event of a dust-storm.

"Dust-storm?" he smiled. "Never heard of such a thing!"

"Enough of your leg-pulling," I snapped. "Don't overdo it! Don't tell me you've never seen a storm raising thousands of tons of dust into the air, and the soil into the bargain, and blotting out the sun; don't tell me you've never seen the scorching whirlwind knock a man off his feet and bury trees in sand to their crowns, never seen the lights turned on at noon because of the darkness caused by the black dust.... Don't tell me you've forgotten!"

"But I have forgotten," Bogdan pleaded. "You can do what you want, Father."

What was I to do? Could I whip him, considering that he was grown-up, and at his post tending the sheep?

We came to the cotton fields. The bolls—bursting open in the brilliant sunlight—were dazzlingly white.

"My cambric blouse is made of this cotton," Orishka boasted.

Amazing things were happening all around us! A rainbow-like bridge stretched across a river—a light, web-like bridge woven, seemingly, from silver thread.

"A wide river.... Where did it come from? I've crossed and re-crossed the Taurida on foot many a time, but I've never seen a river in these parts!"

"This is a new canal," Orishka explained softly.

A life-giving artery flowing through the steppe! From away towards the horizon it stretched across the steppe, and then vanished in the hazy distance.... It was easy to follow its course because of the orchards and vineyards along its banks. What a sight!... Full-grown, well-tended orchards as far as the eye could see, branches bending gracefully, fruit hanging in thick clusters—juicy and rosy.

"Do you see those orchards, Orishka. Guess, what kind of apples those are?"

"Yours—the Stalinskoye!" she answered curtly.

We had come to journey's end. I lingered in the orchards until dawn, wisecracking with the girls (who were very much like mine!), and then I woke up.

I share my dream with Orishka:

"We reached the sun by the heavenly highway, walked right through it and came out on the other side.... It must have been visible from down below—imagine you and I slipping into the sun just like that."

"Was it shining on the other side?" Orishka asked earnestly.

"Certainly! And it was warm too. It's the function of the sun to shed warmth and light on all the four winds. You should have seen the life they lead there! It's summer all the year round, there's eternal peace, and the orchards bear fruit from January to December."

Orishka isn't the least bit surprised. Indeed, why get excited over a dream when it will soon come true?

Another glorious morning. The very moment I cross the threshold I know that it will be a calm, pleasant day (we don't have many calm days in our parts, for the hot wind still pays unwelcome visits). The bracing spring air refreshes me. The morning smoke rises from the chimneys in tall, slender columns that seem to have arisen overnight in our Kavunovka, like white colonnades propping up the blue expanse of the sky. The rising sun is crimson, the dewdrops glisten on the bare, motionless branches. The starlings have arrived and are chattering under Fedya's window to get him out of bed: time to get up, and hang up the cosy cote you've made for us to nest in!

Our Sinyavka overflowed its banks during the night, and part of our yard is under water.

"Look," I shout to Orishka through the window, "look at the reservoir in the vegetable garden—might just as well dig canals into the steppe!"

I must dig out my mahonia, so the water doesn't get at this wild evergreen—a present from Stepan Fedorovich Mironets. I brought it back with me from Stepnoy last year, and planted it in the garden. I wanted to see if it could stand the winter in the open. It did, and is as green as ever. Orishka wants to know why I'm digging it out.

"Can't you see," I tell her, "I want to replant it in the orchard."

"Other people bring things home, but you're always taking things away," she scolds.

"Isn't our collective-farm garden also a home to me?" I reply pointedly. "Surely you don't mean that! And yet you want to become a Hero of Labour!"

"Don't snap my head off, Mikita!" she says in a huff. "I'm not stopping you? Why are you so touchy?"

"You would have done so if I hadn't stopped you!" I answer.

"If you hadn't stopped me! Well, if you want to know, I want to be Heroine of Labour, and I shall be one!... Don't you want to win a Stalin Prize?"

The she-wolf! I don't know why I love her (but I do, and miss her terribly when we part even for a single day!).

"Mahonia!" Orishka storms, "do you think I'll shed tears over it? You can't have my dairy-farm, but as for all the rest, dig up whatever you want, and take it all to your island, all the trees, and the pigsty, and the paling, and.... everything! Take it all, and me into the bargain, and plant me on that island of yours if you care!"

"That's out of the question, Orishka," I tease her. "You might begin growing all over again. Then I'd have more of you on my hands than I could manage!"

"You could try," she snaps back.

Off she goes, gesticulating and scaring the life out of the starlings.

I take up the mahonia in my arms, its roots clotted with fresh, pungent-smelling earth. Let it grow in the island farm, it'll have more room there.

It might be asked why I bother with mahonia. Who knows, it may come in useful as a wild scion when I start crossing the lemons.

My lemons won't always be shut up in the trenches, like soldiers before an attack. Zero hour will come, and then I'll send them over the top to get the better of the Ukrainian climate! Golden lemon-groves are destined to become a familiar sight, lending additional brilliance and beauty to our colourful Ukrainian landscape.

10

Truth always triumphs. There's nothing surprising in this, for such are the dialectics of our life. Lots of people have caused me pain in the past, but I always say: "Don't lose heart, Mikita. You are engaged in a good cause, you are working honestly for the common weal, and, sooner or later, you will win through."

My prevision never fails, as a rule, because the laws of life work for me.

But why speak only about myself? Take my friend—Stepan Fedorovich Mironets.... He is now manager of the Experimental Station, and Assistant Professor of Agriculture. I knew him when he came to us from college just a young, green agronomist—temperamental, and so skinny that you could almost see his heart beating. Some people couldn't endure his tireless energy, his passion for Michurin, and they frowned on his friendship with Lysenko (he was at college with him). Not just insignificant buggus stolyarchuks, but oracles highly rated at the time fell upon him. They slandered him, saying he was an embezzler, and an empty-headed social climber. They tried their damnedest to break him, and had it been anywhere else in the world, he would have been driven to suicide. But Mironets, conscious of his strength, knew that right was on his side and he never curried favour with anyone. He spoke out boldly even against his teachers, the silver-haired mentors who had taught him in college to X-ray lentils and look for gens with the aid of microscopes.

At a difficult moment Stepan Fedorovich confided in me:

"They say I'm a social climber and that I am disrespectable to my teacher, a well-known professor.... I've come to the crossroads, to follow one road is to submit

to his authority, to take the other is to follow the people, to uphold their interests and their needs. I know that the professor thinks ill of my behaviour, and it hurts that he takes me for an ungrateful student.... 'I've toiled and toiled,' he thinks, 'pinned all my hopes on that chap, and now he turns against me.' The professor imagines that he alone was my teacher. He doesn't take into account that the Komsomol, the Party and the people had a hand in my upbringing, and I'm happy that their influence has proved stronger than the word and letter of his formal and lifeless science!"

This Comrade Mironets is a game boy, a rare fighter.

A portly celebrity from the People's Commissariat of Agriculture visited us that year. And far from backing the young scientist, he fell upon him with all the weight of his bulky person. He announced a public meeting at the Experimental Station, invited all the local agronomists, me, the self-educated prodigy, included.

While Stepan Fedorovich was making his report on the work of the station, the frowning visitor, sprawled in his chair and kept up a running fire of interjections.

"Let's have less high-sounding scientific terminology!" he butted in. "We know you want to put us under the spell of words! Better tell us how you squandered the money!"

Mironets let him have his say, and then continued his speech:

"We've managed to find a way of destroying ninety-eight per cent of the boll weevil...."

"Hold on," the obese oracle interrupted again. "Has anything like that been done in America?"

"Yes...." Mironets replied.

"Then buy one of their books for five gold rubles, and don't waste any more time and money!"

I couldn't restrain myself any longer, and, speaking from where I was in the middle of the hall, said:

"We know the station and its interesting and fruitful work. Let Comrade Mironets finish his report. No more interruptions, comrade visitor. Anyone who doesn't want to listen can go outside for a breath of fresh air."

The hall buzzed with approval. The very important person looked daggers at me, but kept his tongue between his teeth. Mironets described his experiments, and won the day.

The portly visitor was later exposed as an enemy of the people and vanished into thin air.

That explains why I say that the laws of life are wonderful. I always say to the young people: "Stand fast, young man or woman, if truth is on your side, do as your conscience bids you, and never forget your duty to the country. The Party and the people are the supreme authority for you, the compass that never goes astray. Strength and happiness, wealth and boundless opportunities rest with it."

Even nowadays we occasionally come across those who—weather and situation permitting—try to make their mark with the aid of all kinds of hocus-pocus, instead of working wholeheartedly for the common weal. But I've noticed all down the years that these jackdaws decked in peacock's feathers invariably come to grief. Our Soviet climate is unhealthy for them. Renown is not lavished indiscriminately in our country. It grows out of the soil, so to speak, and the full value of the workday must be put in for it. The playground for the trumpet blowers and the bluff merchants who'd sell their own father for "a place under the sun" is over there, across the ocean. Our youth has no need to look for a place under the sun—there is sun enough for all, no matter what part of our Soviet land they choose.

I reflect on these things every time I look back and recall those who have achieved success in our life, and those who disappeared ingloriously from the scene....

Today our orchard is filled with noisy and cheerful people: we're planting the Stalinskoye. My heart rejoices at the industry, the girlish chatter and the brilliance of the beautiful day!

As I look down from the top of the island, my eyes take in an expanse that is bigger, I daresay, than several Beniluxes. The river meadows—our southern Dnieper wilderness—sprawl northwards. They are still bare under the sparkling flood of spring water. Above them mighty eagles circle in the clear sky, blinded by the radiance of spring and the dazzling lustre of the boundless floods. Away to the south Kavunovka and the Red Banner Mine settlement gleam white. Among the long-abandoned worked-out mines the buildings of the busy workings stand out, and beyond them, all the way to the shores of the sea, stretches the steppe; the pylons of the high-voltage lines lead away to the horizon through the transparent haze of spring. In the floating haze I visualize the luxuriant oases—green groves—that will shortly bloom in the steppe!

At the highest point on our island, the outpost on the fringe of the river meadows, there is an airy arbour overgrown with hollyhock. I built it myself, and like to sit in it now and then like a king on his throne, because everything here is the work of my hands, and my orchard descends the slopes, tier by tier, to the edge of the water.

But I have no business here right now—my hands are full with jobs of all kinds: planting trees, attending to visitors, handing out seedlings. Yes, handing out seedlings! And Stalinskoye at that! Didn't I tell you that the truth always triumphed?

Comrade Meleshko and Ziuza are both here. Lydia Tarasovna has been able to prove the convenience of writing out invoices for the seedlings right on the spot, and not in the office, since in the spring every gardener's time is doubly valuable.

Meleshko writes out the invoices on his knee, signing them with a real ministerial flourish (with all this signing I fear that the poor fellow will no longer be able to write horizontally).

"Thick as flies," Meleshko growls at my young customers. "Don't forget to show them which end of the sapling goes into the soil, Mikita! Otherwise they'll plant them upside down.... And don't forget to choose Lisogor's saplings, you know best what he wants...."

Some of the customers protest against the favouritism that they discern in this order.

But Meleshko retorts: "Let's have another lecture from you tomorrow, but remember to wipe the milk from your lips before you begin. You know who Lisogor is, and yet you have the audacity to speak of him like that! For you Lisogor is more than just one person. When some of you were knee high to a grasshopper Lisogor was working with us, laying out this orchard for you.... Today he is in the forward positions out in the steppe, combating the hot winds. Keep the best for Lisogor, d'you hear, Comrade Bratus? Bear in mind that Lisogor's garden will also shelter our fields."

My saplings are going out into the world. I've given some to Pavel Pligun, and to Apollon Komashka. It's now Zina Snegireva's turn to get hers, and I'm expecting the people from the Red Banner Mine.

"Promise me, Zina," I say to the girl," that a few years hence you'll be giving seedlings of this species to others."

"I'll supply the whole of Kakhovka," she promises.

"That's your best dowry, lass," I say to her. "You needn't be ashamed of starting out in life with it. If I had my way, I'd ask each member of our great big family what he has to show as we approach communism, the brightest era in history. Look back, I'd say, and if

you find that you haven't done enough, do more before it's too late!"

"I'll follow your advice, Mikita Ivanovich," the saucy cat answers back, and I can't help smiling at her, at this rosy-cheeked, windsome, lovable girl. Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin used to say that orchards ennoble people and make them more gentle. Orchards mould people! If only Orishka had worked here she'd be as gentle as a lamb. At times gardeners are fierce and merciless, that I admit, but chiefly in relation to the pest which tries to gain a foothold on the trees in May, encroaching on our future, on our ovaries and experiments, on all our daring dreams. Gardening is a job that knows no let-up, but it's an honourable profession, a peaceful profession. I would say that ours is not just a peaceful calling, it symbolizes man's peaceful activity and his striving for beauty and abundance. Those who think in terms of blood and destruction never bother about orchards: they have no time for them. We often say: the dove of peace! And to my mind we should add to the dove and the laurel on the peace emblem a cherry, apple or oak sapling. Without troubling anyone the sapling takes root and stretches to the sun—peaceful, calm and gentle. And yet it has great strength, capacity for growth and development; and these qualities made it formidable against the scorching winds, dust-storms, and other scourges.

I talk about these things with Zina Snegireva, as I give her the saplings. She listens attentively, and then says that she is in complete agreement with me.

Lydia Tarasovna takes Comrade Ziuza to the lemon-grove. I catch glimpses of them through the foliage: they stop beside No. 3 trench, conversing softly. Lydia Tarasovna, to be exact, is doing the talking, while the long-legged Ziuza hovers over her like a crane, nodding his head, and I have the impression that a huge angry bird is pecking at something. Keep pecking, Comrade

Ziuza, it'll do you a world of good.... I don't know if Ziuza still has the scurvy that he brought back with him from the Arctic—his wife told Orishka some time ago that there are blood-stains on his pillow every morning from the bleeding gums.... When the lemons bear fruit I'll give him some, so that he can attend to them. He is silly! Maybe I had his scurvy in mind when I resolved to grow lemons, which did not figure in our production plan.

After inspecting the lemon-grove they moved towards the mahonia.

But here comes a group of voluble Young Pioneers from the mining settlement. Trust them to know all the paths to the orchard, all the short cuts that by-pass Meleshko's barriers, and especially those he puts up in summer. But in summer the children run about sunburnt and smudgy, and now they're marching in step, in parade formation, as it were, in white shirts and red neckties. Their lively chatter is audible from afar as they march in a neat little flock.... And who is that in the front rank with the independent swagger? It's none other than Levko, my grandson—Lev Bogdanovich!

As I've said, I have a flair for meeting unusual people. And this boy is one—a gifted youngster! Just look at his eyes: large and round, sparkling out of a clean white face. I wonder who it is he takes after with that intelligent and lively face, and he is absolutely fearless. He spends the summers with us, bickering with Orishka all the time. He grafts tomato shoots on to his grandmother's potatoes, and when Orishka wants to pull his ears, she just can't get near him—he runs away to the river-bank and shins up the tallest of the poplars, just like a squirrel. Orishka tracks him down, but she's helpless: the youngster is so high up in the branches that her heart misses a beat. She circles the tree like a hen with chicks, calling to him, but all in vain. Levko swings precarious-

ly up and down astride a branch, and laughs up his sleeve.

"I won't come down until the hybrids ripen on the potato," he tells her.

The lad has a definite leaning towards my branch of science. It isn't just the cherry-juice on his lips all through the summer, or the tomatoes he grafts on grandmother's potatoes. He hangs around me for hours in the orchard, watching intently, inquiring about the secrets of plant life.

He has come with the Young Michurin Club. They want to know all about the orchard, their eager eyes take in everything. The mahonia beckons: look, how green I am; the birds on the poplar chirp: come, come quick; and the tiny orchard tractor also splutters its say: stop and have a look!

After politely greeting Meleshko, the Young Pioneers warily by-pass him and are now racing towards me, saluting me cheerily, paying me all the respects due to my age.

Some of them call me Grandad, others Mikita Ivanovich, while one cocky lad addresses me as Comrade Bratus!

Not an inch taller than a blade of grass he is, and yet he calls me his comrade!

They crowd around me and I have the impression the air has become brighter. They all clamour for saplings:

"We want the Stalinskoye!"

"The Shafran!"

"The Semirenka!"

"That will never do!" I interrupt them. "One at a time, jackdaws!"

"We're not jackdaws! We're Young Michurinists!"

"I beg your pardon, but you mustn't all speak at once!"

"We have a monitor," they announce.

"Let's have a look at him," and he steps forward. "Ah, so it's Lev Bogdanovich Bratus! Glad to meet you...."

What fertile soil for nepotism! I can't resist giving them all that they ask.... It's good to have children about.... They shan't get sickly little stems: I'll give them the best of the stock we put aside for ourselves. I know I'll never regret it, for they'll be in the trusty hands of our cheerful, bright, tenacious Bratus tribe. What does it matter that these hands are still young.

"Don't tether the goats to these trees," I say. "They're no good as watchmen. Or rabbits either—one visited this orchard, and I chased it barefooted through the snow. Look at this cap, it's made from the fur of that rabbit."

"They won't get the chance," the youngsters promise, "neither the frost, the goats, nor the rabbits. We'll post guards, and carefully tend each tree. You'll see, Grandfather, what an orchard we'll have!"

Levko lingers with the obvious intention of asking a question.

"What is it?"

"We need your advice, Grandfather..." he says.

"Fine.... Let's have a pow-wow... Our assembly won't harm anyone—we're people of good-will," I reply.

"Tell us, Grandfather," he begins, "how many flowers must be crossed in order to get a new species?"

Thoughtfully and excited I look at this scion of my family and his companions. It does me good to hear their questions. Their young minds are probing the depths, they want to know how many flowers....

"Not more than five," I tell them.

"Oh, and we thought it would take a thousand!"

"All in good time! We'll come to the thousand. But take five for a start, so that there's no confusion. You can multiply them by five, but you must watch them and note everything you see. Nothing is too trifling in our business."

I take my young friends to the lemon-grove.

"Here you see lemons. Nowhere else in the world are lemons grown at this latitude. It is done only in our country, in our Soviet latitude."

The children are spell-bound: here is something never seen before, as in a fairy-tale.

I conduct the Young Pioneers through the orchard, now bathed in the spring sunshine. It is radiant and gay. My heart sings with the joy of life. The trees are draped in their vivid green, sinewy and happily silent, deeply absorbed in their own growth.

The youngsters have their arms full of saplings—bon voyage!

Plant them, cultivate them, look after them, dear friends. And, remember, the tree planted today will bear fruit in communist society.